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Citation for published version:

Grek, S 2014, 'OECD as a site of co-production: European education governance and the new politics of 'policy mobilization'', *Critical Policy Studies*, vol. 8, no. 3, pp. 266-281.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2013.862503>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1080/19460171.2013.862503](https://doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2013.862503)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Critical Policy Studies

Publisher Rights Statement:

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Critical Policy Studies on 10 March 2014, available online: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/19460171.2013.862503>

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OECD as a site of co-production: European education governance and the new politics of 'policy mobilisation'

Journal:	<i>Critical Policy Studies</i>
Manuscript ID:	Draft
Manuscript Type:	Original Article
Keywords:	education, experts, OECD, boundary

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Pre-Review Only

OECD as a site of co-production: European education governance and the new politics of 'policy mobilisation'

Introduction

The story of education governance in Europe, much like most accounts narrating this old continent, is one of travel and prejudice. On the one hand, travel is integral to Europe, since most of what we identify with a degree of 'Europeanness' has always connected people and ideas through movement and mobility; education, either in its institutionalised or in its less formal guises, has always been central to the 'travelling' of cultures, practices and peoples around Europe. Paradoxically however, the national education 'system' has always been relatively closed off; seen as a bounded entity in itself, it became one of the last fortresses of the nation-state against the predicament of 'global' dictates and shifts. Despite borrowings and 'policy lessons'- which have largely been silenced by education historians for a long time (Lawn 2008)- education has been one of the main pillars of building the 'national', as national stereotyping would continually separate and therefore define 'us' from 'them'.

Yet, this paper will suggest that it is precisely in the dialectical relationship between travel and prejudice that the governing of European education and –why not- 'Europe' itself can more productively be understood. This paper suggests that this antithetical relationship -which has to a large extent shaped European history- between a desire to move, travel, get to know one another, yet routinely, almost subconsciously finding those 'others' as different and hence unintelligible, is a particularly productive setting in which to investigate the production of European policy.

Located in the field of the transnational governance of education, this paper examines the case of the OECD as a key expert organisation in the governing of European education. It builds on previous work (xx 2009) which showed how the OECD became a major Europeanising actor, having not only entered the European education policy arena but in fact monopolising the attention and policy influence within it. This paper goes one step further; working with the specific case of international comparative testing, it examines how the OECD became a dominant education policy actor as a result of its deliberate and systematic mobilisation by the European Commission¹, which found in the OECD not only a great resource of data to govern (which it did not have before) but also a player who would be pushing the Commission's own policy agenda forward, albeit leaving the old subsidiarity rule intact.

In order to contextualise the case under question, the paper begins by offering an explanation of the background, ideas and concepts that have been framing this research. I then move on to discuss the case of international comparative testing; we will briefly sketch the main studies which have metamorphosed it into a spectacle of surveillance and control for national education systems and have had tremendous effects on education policymaking not only on participant countries but on European education policy making overall. I move on to explain and discuss the role of experts in this emergent European policy field and finish off by an examination of 'policy mobilisation'; applying theory from the field of social studies of science and technology, the concepts of boundary work and 'boundary organisation' (St Clair 2006; Jasanoff 2004; Guston 2000) are applied in order to show the ways that the OECD has transformed into a 'site of co-production' of both knowledge and social order (St Clair 2006).

¹ By 'European Commission', I refer more specifically to the Commission's Directorate General Education and Culture (DG EAC)

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3 Finally, it should be noted that the paper builds on current ESRC-funded research entitled XX
4 (information removed for reasons of anonymity) and, for the purposes of this paper, uses mainly
5 qualitative data derived from interviews with key policy actors.
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7 **1. Framing ideas and concepts**

8 **a. Europeanisation and education**

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11 At least since the mid-1990s, studies of European integration have focused on explaining the building
12 of Europe primarily through a top-down agenda, where ‘Brussels’ and its formal institutions and
13 structures are the foremost and sometimes sole players in the field (Favell and Guiraudon 2011).
14 Hence, other fields of governing activity, such as education, have been persistently considered
15 irrelevant, as the rule of subsidiarity would suggest that the national formally disallows any European
16 policy links: recent research has however suggested that, in fact, the opposite is the case (Ozga et al
17 2011). Having been seen as more fundamental in the building of nations rather than Europe, education
18 as a field of action for the fabrication of a single European polity has been continuously
19 misrecognised – nonetheless, education and culture were in fact the initial building blocks of the
20 project ‘Europe’ (see Shore 2000; Pepin 2006; Grek 2008). On the other hand, this persistent omission
21 might not simply be a misrecognition – more cynically, it could also reflect deeper and long-standing
22 disciplinary hierarchies, which suggest that some scholarly work derives status and exclusive
23 authority in the field of study through the exclusion of lesser ‘others’ –in this case, education (again,
24 with exceptions -see Martens 2007).
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29 Contrary to these dominant assumptions, education is a fruitful area for the analysis of Europeanising
30 processes, not only because of its role in nation building in Europe in the 19th c. (Nóvoa 2002), but
31 also and crucially through its more recent transformation from its former institutionalised and ordered
32 sequences into a much more fluid and transnational phenomenon, that of learning (Lawn and Grek
33 2012). Learning across Europe is vital for the building of the knowledge and more recently the
34 innovation society –it is (or so we are told) a prerequisite for economic growth and the cohesion of
35 Europe. More importantly perhaps, learning has also become one of the most powerful tools for the
36 governing of Europe, through the increased emphasis on what is more commonly referred to in the
37 literature as ‘policy learning’ (Haas and Haas 1995; May 1992; Bennett 1997; Raffe and Spours 2007;
38 Steiner-Khamsi 2004). Either through meetings (such as those I discuss below) (Freeman 2008) or
39 through the more direct and unforgiving comparison of country statistics (Grek 2009), learning from
40 and with others is one of the leading modus operandi for the ‘soft’ governance and governing at a
41 distance of the European peoples (Lawn 2003; Clarke and Ozga 2011).
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46 The article builds on the questioning of two dominant conventions that have so far to an extent
47 dictated our understanding of how Europe is constructed and mobilised; the first one, methodological
48 nationalism, is endemic in the social sciences (Guiraudon 2003; Guiraudon and Favell 2009) and
49 particularly in the field of education (Ozga 2008). Of course, given the unit of study, it is not
50 surprising that education research is more or less nationally framed and nationally conducted.
51 Nonetheless, this should not distract from the fact that a lot of its focus during the last thirty years has
52 also been ‘applied’ (although there are honourable exceptions, see for example Robertson and Dale
53 2008; Ozga et al 2011; Normand 2010); focused usually on the school improvement agenda and
54 therefore limited to an examination of classroom practice, it often appears as removed from broader
55 questions regarding the governing of the social (Ozga, Grek and Lawn 2009). As a result, education
56 research (at least in the Anglophone tradition) has lost much of its creative, inquisitive potential to
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3 locate and sociologically analyse a number of its actors who act as brokers between their national loci
4 and 'Europe'.
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6 In contrast, this paper builds on -relatively recent- research which examined the interaction of national
7 education systems with 'Europe' and the Europeanizing effects this produces (Ozga et al 2011).
8 Weaving the concepts of quality, governance and Europeanisation into the analysis, this research
9 showed how new and evolving practices of governing are forming and shaping European education
10 identities and policy spaces. Subsequently, and given the high profile that the OECD has acquired in
11 education policy in recent years, this work evolved into an examination of the transnational policy
12 learning taking place amongst the two major international actors, the OECD and the European
13 Commission, in the field of international comparative assessment². This research strived to
14 understand and explain the massive growth in data production and use, its new capacity to flow across
15 Europe (and beyond), and its new role in the fabrication of European education as a governable policy
16 space. In order to contextualise the analysis, the following section will give a brief historical
17 background to the formation of this new policy arena.
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20 21 **b. The European education space** 22

23 Education policy activity in the EU could historically be classified in several ways; for those in favour
24 of history through milestones, the Treaty of Rome (1957), the Single Act (1987) and the Maastricht
25 (1992) and Amsterdam (1997) Treaties could be seen as the main four stages (1957-1987; 1987-1992,
26 1992-1997 and 1997-) in this process (Shaw 1999). The European Education Policy Space was not
27 determined merely by the fairly stable geographical boundaries of a common market: as early as the
28 1960s, it became a shared project and a space of meaning, constructed around common cultural and
29 educational values. These ideals had a strong social dimension which became particularly appealing
30 and promising after the devastation and despair of the two World Wars. The Member States of the
31 Union were invited in a project to build a social Europe which would establish itself as the significant
32 'Other' against the inhumanity of an economic system of winners and losers, which was accelerating
33 to global dominance.
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36 However, it soon turned out that the "people's Europe" was not sufficient to respond to the demands
37 of the new millennium. Despite subsidiarity, the field of education served for over three decades in
38 the project of the creation of a European common identity. In history and geography, in narratives and
39 tradition, Europe became a value in itself -education and culture, through over-emphasising
40 commonalities and sidelining differences, were handy crutches in lifting the idea of Europeanization.
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43 At the same time, national education systems – at least in the West- remained more or less the same;
44 they welcomed exchanges and networks as the additional European 'extra', which offered a fresher
45 flavour of cosmopolitanism in their somewhat stale school curricula of the old Europe. Despite the
46 systematic efforts to create a common European education space, education in the pre-Lisbon era
47 remained largely a national topic. In the face of globalization and the dominance of the knowledge
48 economy, new and urgent technologies of persuasion had to be devised; the voluntary nature of the
49 previous arrangement was too loose to respond to the severe economic challenges of both the
50 education and the wider market. Creating, regulating and monitoring, or in other words, governing the
51 European education space now had to be based on statistics and what Rose calls 'governing by
52 numbers' (1991).
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58 ² XX (information removed for anonymity purposes).
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3 Recounting this history of the formation of the European education space, albeit briefly, is significant
4 as it allows us to comprehend those defining events that turned the European education space from a
5 rather idealistic project of cultural cohesion to the much sharper contemporary competitive reality;
6 and second, it enables us to slowly understand how, when and why international comparative testing
7 entered this space and, with what impact. This is important to take into account, since Europeanisation
8 represents yet another conduit of globalisation; thus, the construction of education indicators by large,
9 global, transnational organisations, like the OECD, World Bank or Unesco, adds another layer of
10 complexity to the picture. These data sets have now become the sine qua non of European education
11 governance as they provide information regarding education in the nations which are both EU and
12 OECD members; as a consequence -or perhaps a precondition- for their utilisation in Europe, there
13 has also been alignment in approaches to measurement and category construction. Statistical
14 categories are now shared across all the major transnational organisations, with some being at the lead
15 of measurement expertise; while the OECD is still predominantly a think tank focussing on matters of
16 economic policy, it has created a niche as a highly technically competent agency for the development
17 of educational indicators and comparative educational performance measures. As we will discuss in
18 the next section, OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in particular, a
19 non-curriculum-based measure of comparative educational performance of students at the end of
20 compulsory schooling in literacy, mathematics, science and problem solving, is dominant globally (at
21 least in the Global North) as the key international comparative measure of the effectiveness of
22 schooling systems. It is to these international comparative tests that we will now turn in order to
23 construct our case and discuss the main foci of this paper; the role of experts and policy mobilisation.

28 **2. The case of international comparative assessment: OECD, IALS and PISA**

29
30 Indeed, testing has become the lifeblood of education governance in Europe and globally. It is more
31 than simply a statistical project; rather, it has become part of consistent efforts to restore legitimacy
32 and trust between populations and their governments. As Hall contends, 'building legitimacy requires
33 potential users in the process, as well as technical experts. The most important role of indicator sets
34 may be in framing the issues and defining the problems, rather than suggesting the solutions' (2009,
35 no page numbers).

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38 The governance of international comparative testing reflects these values. Project boards usually work
39 in conjunction with a large range of consortia of international partners and technical advisors
40 (statisticians, media specialists and, interestingly, philanthropists); they also consult with a vast array
41 of different actor groupings, such as academics, private companies, policy makers, associates, country
42 correspondents, regional working groups and others. Regular training courses are delivered as well as
43 seminars, and regional, thematic and global conferences. Although all these initiatives suggest
44 sustained efforts to include and create consensus with the greatest number of stakeholders possible,
45 the role of experts remains central; before they acquire a more 'public' and visible face, tests are
46 being discussed, negotiated and indeed fought over amongst field experts for a long period of time.

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49 The case of the OECD is particularly interesting because, unlike the EU, it does not have the legal
50 instruments, nor the financial levers to actively promote policy making at the national level within
51 member nations. Nonetheless, through ranking exercises such as the 'Education at a Glance' annual
52 reports, the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), its Indicators in Education project, the more
53 recent TALIS survey which focuses on teachers, through PISA and through national and thematic
54 policy reviews, its educational agenda has become significant in framing policy options not only at
55 the national but also, as it has been argued, in the constitution of a global policy space in education
56 (Ozga and Lingard 2007; Lingard and Grek 2007; Lingard, Rawolle and Taylor 2005). This raises the
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3 question -what has transformed the OECD to one of the most powerful agents of transnational
4 education governance? Martens (2007) has contributed substantially to this discussion suggesting that
5 the ‘comparative turn’ –‘a scientific approach to political decision making’ (2007; 42) – has been the
6 main driver of OECD success. Through its statistics, reports and studies, it has achieved a brand
7 which most regard indisputable; OECD’s policy recommendations are accepted as valid by politicians
8 and scholars alike, ‘without the author seeing any need beyond the label “OECD” to justify the
9 authoritative character of the knowledge contained therein’ (Porter and Webb, 2004).

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12 Drawing on Marten’s (2007) ideas, we can see that there is a taken-for grantedness about education
13 indicators, despite all the commentary asking for contextualisation in their interpretation (e.g. Nóvoa
14 and Yariv-Mashal 2003), and this is indicative of the way in which they have become an accepted part
15 of the contemporary educational policy lexicon across the globe, within and well beyond the OECD,
16 and of their growing significance to the work of the OECD itself since the 1980s. PISA now accounts
17 for approximately 30 per cent of the Education Directorate’s budget inside the OECD and is funded
18 directly by participating nations. One could suggest that the OECD’s greatest impact has been in
19 relation to its Indicators agenda, including PISA, and its role in constructing a global educational
20 policy field through governance by comparison (Ozga and Lingard 2007; Martens 2007). Indeed,
21 Antonio Nóvoa argued, ‘comparing must not be seen as a method, but as a policy...the expert
22 discourse builds its proposals through “comparative” strategies that tend to impose “naturally” similar
23 answers in the different national settings’ (2002; 144). Although that might be too stark a contrast,
24 and although comparison can be both (there are certainly good epistemological reasons for
25 comparative research that owe nothing to policy), it is still important to acknowledge the power of
26 comparison as a governing technology.
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31 There has been a range of such studies that the OECD has been organising since the early 1990s, the
32 majority of which were adult literacy studies initially, followed by the delivery of the most successful
33 one, PISA, and more recently PIAAC, the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult
34 Competencies (2011). The first literacy study for example, the International Adult Literacy Survey
35 (IALS) was the first and largest international comparative testing regime of its kind. Conducted from
36 the early 1990s, it was an innovative study, as it was the first time ever that an international
37 comparative dimension was added to the construction of a literacy survey instrument. Thus, it
38 heralded a new era in the construction and evolution of international comparative studies, as for the
39 first time ever it gave international testing a comparative dimension, where measurement against other
40 countries’ performance offered unprecedented visibility and thus exposure. As it was an original and
41 new endeavour, slowly at the start but increasingly later on, IALS boosted confidence in the
42 construction of measurement tools of this kind, increased their persuasive power in regard to their
43 validity and transparency and created substantial revenues to the research agencies administering
44 them. Finally, and perhaps above all, it created a circle of like-minded expert communities, who found
45 in these studies a platform for promoting the problematisation of specific issues, their
46 institutionalisation through their exchanges and the setting up of the study, as well as their
47 legitimisation, in the form of advice to failing countries, once the results were published.
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52 Following the successful IALS endeavour, PISA, the Programme for the International Student
53 Assessment, became a major instrument in providing data for the European education systems almost
54 from the start. The international dimension of the survey, which overrides the boundaries of Europe to
55 compare student performance in countries as diverse as the United States, Greece and Indonesia, gave
56 PISA a particularly significant weight as an indicator of the success or failure of education policy.
57 While always testing reading, mathematical and scientific literacy, its innovative dimension -and part
58 of its interest as a governing device- lies in the fact that it does not examine students’ mastery of
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3 school curricula, rather the focus is on an assessment of young people's ability to practically apply
4 their skills in everyday life situations. The focus on 'real-life' circumstances and on students' capacity
5 to enter the labour market with core skills, such as literacy and numeracy, has taken PISA's focus of
6 interest away from less explicit educational aims that resist measurement (e.g. democratic
7 participation, artistic talents, understanding of politics, history etc), towards a more pragmatic view of
8 education's worth: 'its relevance to lifelong learning' (OECD 2003). Finally, and perhaps most
9 significantly, a key feature of PISA is:

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

14
15 Hence, this is not simply a testing regime –it is constructed and operates under a clear and specific
16 policy framework, which is to be adopted by the participant countries if they are to improve their
17 future PISA assessments and thus improve their standing in attracting economic and human capital
18 investment. In other words, the involvement of the OECD with the steering of education policy in
19 participant countries does not stop with the publication of the PISA –or whichever study's- results; on
20 the contrary, this is perhaps where it begins. Expert groups write expert reports, analysed and taken
21 forward by other national and local experts, while the Commission expert committees are also on
22 board in order to keep the game in sight and keep it running. It is to the role of the experts therefore
23 that we now have to turn to.

24 25 26 27 **3. Steering the soup? Experts, conflicts and management of knowledge**

28
29 The brief discussion of IALS and PISA above shows some of the reasons why international
30 comparative testing has become one of the prime instruments in the steering and exchange of
31 governing knowledge in education in Europe today. Their development has created the necessary
32 preconditions for achieving policy understanding, travel, translation and thus, despite local
33 idiosyncrasies and histories, policy consensus.

34
35 Nonetheless, the story of the development of international assessment should not misguide us towards
36 the sketching of an ideal-type of policy generation process where genuine debate and the building of
37 relationships and collaborations produce new knowledge. Hugh Heclo (as cited by Freeman 2012)
38 described policy as a 'reverberating' cobweb of conditions, people and practices. Freeman uses this
39 eloquent image to discuss the collective production of meaning through meetings and documents;
40 using Heclo's idea of 'collective puzzling' for the making of policy, he argues that

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43 'this puzzling entails multiple acts of translation, but only to the extent that we can think of
44 translation as generative, an active process of the production of meaning. It seems impossible to ask,
45 at any given moment, 'where is policy?' for it seems to be always incipient, mobile, somewhere
46 between'. (Freeman 2012; 17)

47
48 International comparative testing is an excellent example of the kind of mobility of the policy making
49 process that Freeman describes; the discussion of the organisation, preparation and delivery of
50 international tests makes a case precisely for a close examination not only of the movement of policy
51 in itself, but crucially of *those who move it*. The role of experts is central as their own in-depth and
52 trusted knowledge allows them to be highly mobile; in the name of their specialised expertise, experts
53 have to be numerous; they are employed by different policy-making and research organisations and
54 are accountable to them alone; their expert knowledge suggests the need for them to be present and
55 offer advice at different stages of the policy-making process, yet it is precisely this same trusted and
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3 objective knowledge that renders them invisible. They offer evidence for policy, yet their most
4 important role is symbolic; that of the legitimisation of knowledge (Boswell 2009).
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6 This is the kind of status that the OECD acquired with the conduct of the big international tests; the
7 seal of unequivocal, trusted truth which, as we will see further on, it took one step further into an
8 almost amalgamation of knowledge into policy. Quantification, simplicity and measurability were the
9 trio of the key ingredients of its success, as slowly yet surely the OECD managed to persuade that its
10 statistical reasoning was not simply the conventional, partially-constructed representation of very
11 complex and different contexts but rather the objective reality. Econometrics became the single
12 methodology for its measurements, whereas questions in regard to the epistemology or ethics of its
13 analyses were never asked. Following Kingdon's policy soup model (1984), OECD slowly gathered
14 all the ingredients and the know-how in order to produce best-selling 'knowledge soup'; through its
15 management and steering of knowledge production, it manages and steers new policy agendas and
16 directions. Similar to Kingdon's idea of the primeval soup (1984), ideas for research float around for
17 some time; new avenues of researching education performance are always open. Given the expert
18 marketing of the studies' results globally, failures in performance are broadcast widely; thus, the need
19 for immediate action is necessary. Indeed, the persuasive power of the OECD lays in its construction
20 and measurement of education indicators; the quantitative knowledge it produces is knowledge and
21 action simultaneously, as no indicator has any purposeful existence unless it signals action (Lawn and
22 Grek 2012).
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27 In other words, OECD not only produces evidence quickly and effectively but digests it and offers it
28 to policy makers in the format of policy solutions. In a sense, if we are used to accounts of European
29 policy making as slow, cumbersome and 'coming from nowhere' (Richardson 2001; 21), the OECD
30 bypasses these obstacles in four key ways; first, it defines the limits of the possible by suggesting
31 what can be measured, hence what can be 'done'; second, it carries no political jurisdiction therefore
32 it carries no external threats to national policymaking, as perhaps the Commission or other EU
33 institutions might have done; it now has the experience, networks and the technical and material
34 resources to speed the policy process up so that it can show 'results' within the usually short
35 timeframe that policy makers are in power; and last but not least, it carries all the 'right' ideological
36 messages for education systems in the 21st century -that is, it connects learning directly to labour
37 market outcomes and human capital.
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40 Nonetheless, how has the OECD become such a powerful player in education governance in Europe?
41 As some of the people who work there might have argued, the Education Directorate staff who are
42 based in Paris take few decisions, if any; the OECD, as they argue, is no other than the participant
43 countries and the national actors and experts sent to the OECD committees and meetings. Thus, how
44 accurate is to examine the emergence of this new policy arena by simply focussing on this single
45 international actor? This is where the initial juxtaposition between travel and prejudice is helpful
46 again, as the story of the emergence of the OECD as an influential actor (mostly on the basis of its
47 large international tests) is yet again a story of tension –the expert loves and expert wars that have
48 been forming the history of international comparisons of performance measurement for over a decade.
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52 'So around 2003-2004, we [OECD and Commission] started becoming far more involved. Meetings all
53 over the world, I don't know how many countries I visited but what is important is that the Commission
54 is there.... The European member states should see that the Commission is there because one of the
55 criticisms of the Commission since all this started was that we didn't take into account all the good work
56 of the OECD. Which was wrong but they said it. The way of showing them was to actually be there –not
57 an empty chair.' (EC4)
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3 Indeed, although the Commission and the OECD had been leading quite separate ideological paths, a
4 new love affair began emerging –this relationship would gradually strengthen and eventually become
5 the sine qua non for the governing of European education systems. Another interviewee was even
6 more eloquent in his discussion of this flourishing relationship:
7

8 We used to have great competition between the two institutions [OECD and the EC] which was that
9 they were research-based, we were policy-based. And we needed that. They needed the policy aspect
10 to mobilise the European consciousness...it was in their interest working with us ...We had some
11 differences but we are working closer and closer together, we are very very good friends now, there
12 is no conflict (EU3).
13

14 And of course love is power:
15

16 ‘When the OECD started speaking about TALIS [survey on teachers] it attracted the attention of the
17 member states, that all this is very good but it is expensive. ...So I managed to convince my Director
18 General of supporting (the OECD) with an awful lot of millions of euros. And I went back to the
19 OECD with that message and said that of course if we pay we want influence’. (EC7)
20

21 However, there is also a reverse side to the coin. If this is a world of travel, exchange and
22 collaboration, more often than not these exchanges take place in a competitive field, where most large
23 international research organisations strive to secure the limited and diminishing funding available
24 from national governments for the conduct of these studies. As a result, collaboration amongst them
25 for the delivery of studies and the collection of education statistics is not a choice anymore, but a
26 necessity. Conflict and tensions can run deep:
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29 The main reason is that they are competitors and both in scientific and in financial terms it is getting
30 more and more difficult to conduct these surveys. There was a message from member states to the OECD
31 and the IEA³ –get together, sit down and discuss it and do it. Now, 6 months later, we all come together
32 and we ask what was the result of that meeting and the answer was that we didn’t find a date. They don’t
33 work together because they don’t like each other. (EC9)
34

35 Interviewees also describe internal conflict within international organisations and their departments,
36 for example within the OECD itself. The following quotation describes the conflict between CERI
37 (the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation) and the Directorate of Education, similar to the
38 kinds of processes Jullien and Smith (2010) describe when they discuss IOs as internally unstable
39 institutions, rather than the opposite:
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42 They live in different worlds –the same floor at the OECD but in different worlds. They don’t like each
43 other –one is more research-based, the other one more indicators and data, surveys. One is more
44 reflection, the other one is more publicity, the charts –different traditions, the same director. (EC12).
45

46 Finally, another account which describes the conflict and competition for securing contracts for
47 education research in Europe, comes from another interviewee, a key member of staff of one of the
48 Commission’s research agencies:
49

50 I think because the OECD is very much looking for member states’ subsidies and grants and financial
51 support for each separate research activity, they are also keen in showing that they do something unique
52 and innovative in order to get such funding. And so then in a way they are in competition with us. An
53 example is they did a recent policy review which is called ‘Learning for Jobs’ which basically deals with
54 VET. And they didn’t invite us to some national expert groups and so on that are in development –and
55 they did very little use of our work because they wanted to do something that was different and specific
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58 ³ IEA is the...
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3 so that they could sell it to the member states –this is my interpretation, of course. But I think that there is
4 this kind of competition, differentiation between European institutions because we are in competition for
5 funding. (EC3)
6

7 The quotations above come in stark contrast to descriptions of a field of actors who come together
8 regularly and on equal terms to achieve consensus for the pushing of certain agendas. On the contrary,
9 they highlight the need to also focus our attention and study on those meetings that never happen, as
10 well as those actors who are consistently not invited to expert meetings. They direct us to an
11 understanding of a field, which is riddled with internal and external competition for funding,
12 especially in times of reducing national budgets in an era of austerity. Nonetheless, the emerging data
13 make the whole picture even more interesting, especially given the emphasis on the role of the
14 meeting for the development of shared understandings (Freeman 2012). Here is another European
15 Commission actor:
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18 We create an expert group, we do the same as the OECD, we ask member states to designate experts. ...
19 Actually member states are represented by different people who have different views around the same
20 questions. Very often I would almost kill myself at the meetings because I would say , well that is what
21 we ‘ve just decided with the member states yesterday. And the member states were sitting there, saying
22 we’ve never heard of it. And we don’t agree. ...What you discover ...is that people don’t know each
23 other –they don’t even know the others exist. They have never heard of them. They come from different
24 institutions, different backgrounds, different interests, policies, objectives. The member states are not
25 even aware of these contradictions. The result of it is that they don’t have any influence. (EC10)
26

27
28 And he continues:

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30 ... I am not sure if it is in the interest of the OECD or the Commission to solve that problem –because
31 these institutions will benefit from that –the more they contradict each other, the more the institutions
32 decide. And with OECD, surely it is the same. This is so obvious –that’s what they do –OECD is
33 (NAME). We always have a joke with (NAME) –where he is brilliant, is to conclude. He is fantastic in
34 this – conclusions! He is the conclusions expert –they are in before the meeting (laughs). ... It is very
35 convenient (EC10).
36

37 In order to close this section, I will briefly return to the beginning: there we argued that Europe is
38 constructed through travel and prejudice; this is also reflected in the study of the governing of Europe,
39 given both the exchange of ideas that attempt to understand and explain it, as well as the disciplinary
40 limitations and hierarchies which have so far seen the field of education as of lesser relevance and
41 explanatory significance. On the contrary, the paper suggested that the education policy arena is a key
42 perspective in understanding Europe not only because it has become central in the discourses and
43 policy direction followed by the Commission but also, and perhaps more importantly, because the
44 process of learning from, with and at times despite others, is at the heart of the everyday realities of
45 what policy makers do. Having examined the case of international comparative assessment, the paper
46 showed how the education policy agenda in Europe was not simply assembled at the Madou corridors
47 and meeting rooms of the DG Education and Culture; on the contrary, an unlikely actor, given its
48 global and (mostly U.S. resourced) research agenda, became influential and soon arose to dominate
49 the field. But how did this come about?
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53 ‘The OECD didn’t have an agenda on education policy ... [So] the Commission thought, and I fought
54 this for years, that the OECD had to adopt the same agenda as we had developed in Brussels. So van der
55 Pas, the Director General, went to meetings with the OECD and argued for their work, the annual work
56 of the OECD should be the same as the one we have. He argued for and pushed that what we have as a
57 policy agenda should also be relevant for the OECD’ (EC10)
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3 And he continues:

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5 ‘We ended up inspiring OECD to adopt a policy agenda –and that they did with member states. They see
6 the member states and have meetings with the ministers..... So they [member states] go to the institution
7 which they are most influenced by or more easy to work with, or it is more convenient in terms of the
8 political context in the country – which puts the European Commission in a weak situation because in
9 fact we are the threat to the member states despite of the fact that we follow the Treaty etc. and we are a
10 policy organisation. The OECD isn’t. So if you want to weaken the European Commission then you go
11 to the OECD and discuss the same subject matters there. That shift has weakened the Commission and
12 signals the need strongly for the Commission and the OECD to work together. The more you do that the
13 more you have the need to have close cooperation between us, a competitive cooperation, a cooperation
14 of influence, who decides, who draws conclusions’. (EC10)
15

16 The case of the OECD adopting a policy agenda is a case of an international knowledge actor being
17 mobilised, influenced, perhaps even pushed, to become a policy actor in itself. This is not simply a
18 case of knowledge informing policy, as is most commonly the case; it is in fact a fusion of the two
19 realms in such a conscious and strategic manner that raises interesting questions regarding the extent
20 of the technicisation and de-politicisation of education problems in particular and perhaps governing
21 problems more broadly. In a way, it signals a shift from knowledge and policy to knowledge
22 *becoming* policy –where expertise and the selling of policy solutions drift into one single entity and
23 function. The next and final section will attempt a preliminary theorisation of these ideas in order to
24 broaden understanding in regard to the role of transnational expert organisations in education
25 governance and governance in more general terms.
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31 **4. Discussion: policy mobilisation and the rise of ‘competitive cooperation’?**

32 A central issue arising from this analysis is the relationship between the production of knowledge and
33 policy. There is a vast literature on the knowledge and policy continuum as well as on their co-
34 production, especially in the field of ‘hard’ science. Analyses from the field of studies of science and
35 technology have explored the new regulatory role of transnational expert institutions, like the OECD,
36 that are meant to possess both the knowledge base and the expert networks to produce scientific
37 evidence for policy making. In an interesting analysis of the World Bank in producing policy to
38 combat global poverty, St Clair has masterfully shown the negotiated nature of the ‘objective’ data
39 offered by such institutions: ‘definitions and assessments are not account of facts, but rather “fact-
40 surrogates”, well-structured parts of an ill-structured and complex whole’ (St Clair 2011;59). St Clair
41 draws on Désrosières to discuss the relativity of statistics in the pursuit of knowledge for policy
42 making; she shows how the choice of what and who counts as expert in producing evidence for policy
43 is not only a methodological question, but also an epistemological and a moral one. Applying insights
44 from science and technology studies, St Clair suggests that the transnational expert organisations have
45 to be analysed on the basis of their ‘boundary work’; that is in relation to their ability not only to
46 produce knowledge but also new social orders. She discusses the problematic and self-fulfilling nature
47 of what she calls the ‘circular dynamics’ of expert knowledge, since -she suggests- the audiences that
48 are meant to legitimate the knowledge produced are in fact audiences that have, to a large extent, been
49 generated by the expert organisation itself. Finally, she uses the work of Jasanoff (2004) and Guston
50 (2000) to make a case for the role of international organisations as ‘boundary organisations’:
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55 The crucial role of these institutions is, then, to assure the stability between the domains of science and
56 politics, to speak to principals in both domains and to do so in a way that integrity and productivity can
57 be assured. Speaking differently to different audiences, boundary organisations can bring stability to
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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. Because of the OECD, assessing education is often presented simplistically as an empirical problem open to quantification, and hence improvement, rather than also as an epistemic and political endeavour. 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 DG Education and Culture in shaping policy in European member states. Starting from the latter, the data has shown how, why and when the OECD was influenced by the Commission to adopt a policy agenda. In other words, the OECD became a policy actor and indeed a key one, not simply out of its own accord and expert moves; it was *mobilised* to become one. This is where the concept of policy mobilisation is helpful, as it may offer an explanation of the rise of transnational expert institutions as sites of co-production of knowledge and social orders. Policy then is perhaps not everywhere, and it might not be as fluid and as ephemeral as previous analyses might have shown it to be. At least in the field of European education policy, and as the data above has shown, policy travel has had clear points of departure and arrival, as well as carriers and receivers; 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. 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, DG EAC could use it as a point of mediation between its own policy agendas and national education systems. 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; both organisations, the OECD and the Commission, have been seeking legitimisation for the knowledge and policy they produce from continuously turning to one another.

The mobilisation of policy however was soon to become policy competition; the OECD acquired such dominance in the field that the Commission and its agencies have often been sidelined in the policy process. What this might mean for the future of European education governance is still to be seen, nonetheless what is certain is that the Commission now has another policy actor to always take into account –if this actor will be friend or foe remains to be seen.

Friends or foes, loves or wars, travels or prejudice – contrasts and oppositions keep on writing the history of European education policy making. As I tried to show earlier, the construction of the European education policy space was one of a continuous battle against a resisting nation-state education system which had embedded traditions and histories that were threatened by its emergence. Indeed, in the face of increasing internationalisation and globalisation, national education systems have been strengthened as education is seen as an important policy area, still administered nationally

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3 and locally. Global and European policy actors are faced with strong local pedagogies and traditions,
4 which for some are still seen as the cornerstone of the idea of the nation-state itself. Thus, in contrast
5 to other policy areas like climate change or genomics for example, the controversy that a boundary
6 organisation like the OECD deals with, is not a scientific one; rather, it is deeply political and
7 historical, and therefore perhaps presents even greater risk-taking when it comes to proposing reforms
8 both at home and in 'Europe'. And this is perhaps why international comparative testing is of such
9 interest; given the conflictual rather than consensual nature of the relation between the national and
10 'Europe', the OECD has become not only a site for the co-production of knowledge and education
11 policy, but a powerhouse.
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