

The role of the OECD as an agent of Europeanization: problematisation and change in education governance in Europe¹

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1. Introduction

Since the middle of last century, international organisations (IOs) have been increasingly playing an influential role as ‘purveyors of ideas’ and as leading participants in ‘the struggle over education policy content’ (Jones 2007, 94). Over recent years, research has shown the ways that national governments have seemingly ceded some of their autonomy in education policy development to IOs in the context of globalization, and one of its conduits, Europeanization. This paper develops the idea that, apart from the focus on national education systems and their policy connections to the international, IOs and particularly the OECD have had real policy salience within the context of education policy development in wider policy spaces, such as the European education space and its main advocate, the European Commission (EC) and its agencies. While it remains significant as a think-tank and producer of significant international comparative data, the OECD has taken on an enhanced role as a policy actor in Europe, as it seeks for its niche in relation to other supranational agencies (Henry *et al.*, 2001).

Power (1999; 2003a; 2003b; 2004) and Strathern (2000; 2004) suggest that a ‘metrological mood’ (Power 2004; 766) has increasingly become the mechanism through which education systems are measured and made accountable, and has permeated the structure and public face of IOs themselves. In Europe, during the pre-Lisbon era and due to subsidiarity², education governance’s main modus operandi was non-binding cooperation in creating a common identity, fabricated through cultural symbols and exchange (Shore, 2000). However, since 2000, the Commission’s education policy-making tools have entirely changed, with greater emphasis on indicators and benchmarking, which drive change and push the ‘growth and jobs’ agenda forward (Grek 2008). These new policy tools work as governing devices that, through negotiation and co-option, together with cross-comparison and competition, draw national systems closer into European and global frameworks and practices. As the paper will show, similarly, although for much longer, the OECD has been cultivating and promoting technical expertise in creating comparable datasets, where countries can potentially measure the success of their education systems against others and shift their policy orientations accordingly. In this new context, notions such as lifelong learning and the knowledge economy have turned education departments in both organisations into central governing hubs. Thus, the

¹ This paper draws on research in progress on the ESRC funded project ‘Governing by numbers: Data and education governance in Scotland and England’ RES--00-23-1385 (PI Professor Ozga), which is part of the Eurocores ‘Fabricating Quality in European Education’ project of the European Science Foundation; and on the ESRC funded project ‘Transnational policy learning: a comparative study of OECD and EU education policy in constructing the skills and competencies agenda’ RES-000-22-3429 (PI Dr Grek).

² The term ‘subsidiarity’ was formally introduced with the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992, although it was not new in the field of education; it meant the exclusion of any harmonization of the laws and regulations of the Member states –education, like health and culture, would be retained as competences for the Member states alone (Pepin, 2006).

development of new policy technologies, combined with the new significance of education redefined as (lifelong) learning, have together greatly enhanced OECD's and EC's governing capacity, not simply in their use of monitoring and measuring, but crucially in the construction of specific policy 'problems' for the nations and thus the promotion of particular attitudes and dispositions to learning.

Using them as examples, the paper examines OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the more recent one, the Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), in order to discuss processes of problematisation and normalisation of the notions of 'skills and competences' by the two IOs (OECD and EC). It examines the ways both concepts have turned into a significant policy problem (Dale 1986), in need of soft governance through new data, standards and new policy solutions (Lawn 2003). The paper focuses on the nature of the problem, its contours, characteristics and shifting qualities. It discusses the ways that policy problems can be transformed into public issues with all-pervasive and all-inclusive effects that might often break the boundaries of interpretation derived from traditional political science and its research orthodoxies. It suggests that in order to understand the 'problem', one has to move behind it, since the very process of its creation already carries the seeds of its solution.

The paper starts with a brief history of the OECD and its role in education policy development. It moves on to briefly discuss PISA and PIAAC and their impact on European education policy making. Finally, it discusses the role of the OECD as an agent of Europeanization through, first, its use of science (mainly numbers and statistical reasoning) as a political activity and, second, its politics 'as a particular species of production of learning' (Latour 2002 cited in Autés, 2007).

2. OECD and education policy

Founded in 1961, the OECD is an IO with policy influence within its member-nations, but also with increasing impact on a broader global scale. While it is primarily concerned with economic policy, education has taken on increasing importance within its mandate, especially since it has been reframed as central to national economic competitiveness. Papadopoulos (1994) in his institutional history of the OECD states that education always had an 'inferred role' in respect of its economic significance. As will be shown, this inferred role has become more explicit in the context of post Cold war globalization and emergent knowledge economy. The end of the Cold War and the apparent triumph of global capitalism has placed pressures on the purposes of the OECD and changed its remit in some ways.

The case of the OECD is interesting because it does not have the legal instruments nor financial levers to actively promote policy making at the national level within member nations. Henry *et al.* (2001) note that the OECD has been described as a think tank, a geographic entity, an organizational structure, a policy-making forum, a network of policy makers, researchers and consultants, and a sphere of influence. In formal terms, the OECD describes itself as:

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

In the post Cold war era, of course, many more nations meet these two membership criteria.

Although the OECD has remained a USA-backed (and influenced) institution (they still contribute approximately twenty-five per cent of the Organization's budget), Henry *et al.* (2001) argue that throughout its history there has been an ongoing tension between US market liberalism and more European social democratic traditions. To some extent and in the context of globalisation, US market liberalism in the guise of neo-liberalism has won out in the policy regimes of the contemporary OECD, but always framed by complementary concerns for equity, inclusion and social cohesion.

Historically, the OECD's interest in education has been clearly linked to its overall economic objectives. It was only in 2002 that Education became a separate and permanent Directorate within the OECD -until then it had less certain institutional status, gaining a mandate every five years from the Council of the Organisation. Nevertheless, the economistic focus on knowledge and research was not always the way education was seen within the IO. By the early 1970s, the Organization had come to the realization that 'the full range of objectives of education had to be taken into account if the educational activities of the Organization were to make their rightful contribution to economic policy' (Papadopoulos 1994; 64). According to Papadopoulos (1994; 122), this marked the triumph of a more comprehensive, less economistic or human capital, view of education policy within the OECD, which possibly gave more importance to education's social and cultural purposes. Papadopoulos (1994) also shows that a (European) network of progressive sociologists of education was important to the emergence of this policy framing of education. As Rizvi and Lingard (2006; 250) illustrate, the educational projects sponsored by the OECD during the 1970s and 1980s demonstrate the significance of social justice purposes of education and a complex and mediated relationship between education and economic development.

Papadopoulos (1994) stresses that the OECD at the time could not be viewed as an 'homogeneous unit with a narrow, static agenda', but that there were differences and ideological contestations across the Organization, in relation to both its economic and social policy agendas. He argues that until the late 1980s and early 1990s the social justice or equity emphasis won out in the education agendas of the OECD (Papadopoulos 1994). However, Rizvi and Lingard (2006) suggest that the symbiotic relationship between the economy and social justice claims is long over; in fact, for some time now, the social efficiency agenda has usurped the equity one as evident in OECD's programmes of work and policy reports. This is evident, in its support and promotion of a particular economistic view of educational aims linked to the requirements of a global knowledge economy and ideas about educational governance linked to new public management, which increasingly promote corporatized and privatised administration of education, outcome measures and knowledge as commodity (Lingard and Grek 2007). Perhaps the greatest impact of the contemporary educational policy agenda of the OECD has been in relation to its Indicators agenda, including PISA and more recently PIAAC, and their contribution to the construction of a global educational policy field constituted through numbers; this has been described as a new form of governance within member nations, namely 'governing by numbers' (Ozga and Lingard 2007; Novoa and Yariv-Mashal 2003):

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;7-8)

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 long-standing development of education 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 Martens’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% 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 its role in establishing *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 OECD-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 standardisation 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.

This is 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; 6)

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 two sections, I look in more detail at the organisation and content of PISA and PIAAC.

3. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)

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 USA, 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 (Grek 2009). 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; 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; 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. (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. Performance-based testing lies at the heart of the PISA project; it is focused on outputs, therefore always projected forward, into students’ lives and national futures. Hence, it ensures for itself its own ‘lifelong’ continuation. It is performed in cycles and therefore needs follow-ups, ‘repeats’, more rounds – moreover, as we will see in the next section, the recent development of PIAAC guarantees OECD’s lifelong monitoring of learners’ trajectories. No matter the ‘score’, ‘correcting’ practices need to start immediately after the publication of the results. This is the effect of PISA (and other international comparative data). PISA does not simply produce ‘truths’; it creates an incessant apparatus of self-control and improvement.

3a. PISA and Europe

PISA's impact on national education systems in Europe has been well-documented so far. However, it also plays a rather indirect, but no less important role on the governance of the European education space overall. 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).

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 a Eurydice³ 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 UOE⁴ 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 newly-established 'peer learning activities'⁵, 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

³ 'The information network on education in Europe, Eurydice has since 1980 been one of the strategic mechanisms established by the European Commission and Member States to boost cooperation, by improving understanding of systems and policies. Eurydice was also an integral part of Socrates, the Community action programme in education from 1995 to 2006. Since 2007, Eurydice has been included in the EU Action Programme in the field of Lifelong Learning in which, as part of the transversal programme, it helps to support the development of policies in this area, as well as cooperation at European level' (<http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/Eurydice/AboutEurydice>)

⁴ Initials for 'Unesco-OECD-European Union'

⁵ http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc32_en.htm

doing. ...So this transfer of experiences is very complex and very difficult ... 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 about how to benefit from 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. 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. ... 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 (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,

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 IOs, such as the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), as well:

We participate around all discussions around PISA and around TIMSS⁶ 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).

⁶ The IEA Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study.

4. The Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC)

As already discussed, skills and competencies have been central to the OECD through its PISA work. A major study that prepared the ground for the development of PIAAC was OECD's Definition and Selection of Competencies project (DeSeCo) (1997-2005), an effort to provide 'a sound conceptual framework to inform the identification of key competencies, to strengthen international assessments, and to help to define overarching goals for education systems and lifelong learning'⁷. In addition, OECD has already conducted two international adult skill surveys: the International Adult Literacy Survey (ALS) (1994-1996) and the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALL) (2002-2006).

Post-PISA success, PIAAC is the new OECD multi-cycle programme of assessment. In contrast to PISA, it is not organised solely by the Education Directorate but by a collaboration of the latter with OECD's Directorate for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs. Already under way, it will deliver its first test in 2011, aiming to 'help governments to go further in evaluating and designing education and training policies by providing comparative information on skills among their adult populations'⁸. Twenty-four OECD-member countries will take part in the first cycle of the Programme, in addition to three non-member countries (Estonia, Malta, Slovenia). The study has received high recognition and is being promoted at the very top level of the OECD as greatly ambitious. It is in line with OECD's economic view of education and knowledge:

Knowledge and skills are the most valuable assets to present and future generations, as governments seek to maintain global competitiveness, increase the flexibility and responsiveness of labour markets and deal with issues of population ageing. OECD's breakthrough survey on adult competencies, PIAAC, will provide governments with a unique and effective tool to assess where they stand in terms of quantity and quality of the knowledge and skills of their workforce. Equally important, it will provide insights into how skills relate to the social and economic well-being of individuals and nations and also benchmark how effectively education and training systems meet emerging skill demands. (Angel Gurría, OECD Secretary-General, OECD 2008)

Interestingly, PIAAC is also in line with European aspirations and targets:

Many countries adhere to national and multi-national statements of intent regarding the achievement of economic performance targets relative to international norms. An example is the declaration from the March 2000 meeting of the European Council in Lisbon...Monitoring of progress in meeting such international targets necessarily requires international comparisons. (Schleicher, 2008; 629)

The survey's results will be presented in 2013 and they will be based on interviews with 5000 adults (16-65 years old) in each participating country, in order to assess their literacy and numeracy skills and 'their ability to solve problems in technology-rich environments'. The test will also collect information in relation to how adults use their skills at work and in the community (OECD 2008).

Unlike PISA, which is designed and analysed by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), the design and implementation of PIAAC is the responsibility of an international consortium

⁷ <http://www.deseco.admin.ch/>

⁸ http://www.oecd.org/document/57/0,3343,en_2649_37455_34474617_1_1_1_37455,00.html

of research organisations in North America and Europe, led by the Educational Testing Service in the United States⁹.

PIAAC's core features include: literacy in the information age; the use of key work skills through the Job Requirement Approach (JRA) questionnaire; and a background questionnaire, which will measure skill formation and economic and social outcomes (OECD 2004). It is expected that JRA, already applied in the UK Skills Survey, will explain salary variations and employment opportunities based on longer learning trajectories, but also through 'influence skills', such as persuasion and presentation skills. The JRA pilot unfolded in 5 countries (Australia, France, Greece, Korea and the United States) and its results were presented in an 'International Validation Seminar' at a European Commission agency, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) in February 2009. According to Mark Teese, senior OECD economist in another joint JRA OECD-Cedefop workshop held in Paris in May 2008¹⁰, JRA 'will open up a new world for investigating the demand for a range of generic work skills and the implications for education and training policies'.

4a. PIAAC and Europe

According to their work programme¹¹, the European Commission's Centre for Research in Lifelong Learning (CRELL) has substantially contributed to the development of the PIAAC background questionnaire. In addition, a 'Coordination Group' has been established by the DG Education and Culture for cooperation with the OECD in the area of adult skills and PIAAC in particular; most importantly, a total amount of 1.05 million euros has been budgeted in the 2008 EU budget for the support of European countries in PIAAC. Therefore, we see that apart from the mainly German and American-based research consortium responsible for the study, the European Commission, through its agencies, and in particular Cedefop and CRELL, have been closely engaged in the preparation of PIAAC.

The centrality of skills and competencies in the policy work of the European Commission has emerged in tandem with labour market changes, the dominance of the service market industries in Europe and the US, and the requirement by business that education systems prepare a flexible workforce (Lauder et al 2008; Brown et al 2001). In Europe, skills and competencies have been at the forefront of policy from quite early on in the EC's education work; since the 1970s, training and vocational education have been the primary focus of collaborative work bringing European education systems closer together (Pépin 2006). This policy area is thus of particular interest, not just for its centrality in working towards 'becoming the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world' (Council 2000), but in providing a rich and suitable resource for the

⁹ The other members of the Consortium are: Westat in USA; cApStAn in Belgium; the Research Centre for Education and the Labour Market (ROA) at the University of Maastricht; GESIS-ZUMA Centre for Survey Research; the German Institute for International Education Research (DIPF); and the Data Processing Centre of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) in Germany.

¹⁰ www.trainingvillage.gr/etv/upload/etvnews/news/3501-att1-1-05_progress_with_the_jra_pilot_mark_keese.pdf

¹¹ crell.jrc.ec.europa.eu/WP/Workprogramme%202006-07.doc

interrogation of EC policy work, that enables the testing of the convergence and divergence of discourses and policy tools between the OECD and the EC. More recently, Cedefop, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, has been working closely on the identification of skills needs in Europe through the Skillsnet project¹² as well as through CEDRA, the Cedefop Research Arena¹³. Numerous Council Resolutions and Commission staff publications and working documents on the topic have also been published (OJEU, 2007; European Commission 2007a; 2007b). These provide resources for examining and explaining the policy directions that both Cedefop and the Commission have taken, as well as Eurostat, in building the skills and competencies agenda from the early 1990s to the present day.

Apart from the Commission's own projects on framing the skills agenda, its recent involvement in the development of PIAAC with the OECD enables the investigation of the politics and practices around processes of problematisation at the transnational level, and more particularly, the collaboration between EC and the OECD in education governance in Europe. Why and how has the OECD worked with the Commission in developing the study? How have policy actors from the two organizations been working together on this project and how do the two organizations see this new collaboration? What does this interaction suggest for the future instruments of education policy making in the European education space or, indeed, for education governance itself? The next section is going to identify points of convergence in the policy agenda of the two organisations and explore the reasons why their problem framing processes appear increasingly shared and intertwined.

International organisations and the shared construction of policy 'problems'

A considerable body of research has already focused on the education work of each of the two IOs (see, for example, Henry et al 2001; Lawn and Lingard 2002; Ozga and Lingard 2007; Lawn 2003; Pépin 2006; Shore 2000; Martens 2007); however this research does not examine the interaction between them. IOs are often seen as monolithic institutions, or actors with similar interests in a similar context, without attention to the complex set of realities that bring them together and apart over time. Thus important questions about 'what mechanisms work, in what ways, for whom and under what circumstances' (Dale and Robertson, 2007; 219) are neglected, as is a detailed investigation of the *extent* and the *means* through which the two IOs may or may not unite in the construction and pursuit of mutual 'problems'.

This paper attempted to initiate a discussion about the growing alliance between two influential international actors operating within the European education space. As has been shown, due to the impact of PISA on national education systems and European education policy making in the whole, and the more recent, unfolding collaboration with the European Commission in the development of PIAAC, OECD has to be identified as a strong agent of Europeanization, in charge of developing a mounting consensus among nations and IOs about the new pertinent policy agendas in education governance in Europe today. OECD has accomplished this through the comparative turn, a shift

¹² http://www.trainingvillage.gr/etv/Projects_Networks/skillsnet/

¹³ http://www.trainingvillage.gr/etv/Projects_Networks/Cedra/

towards 'a scientific approach to political decision making', that builds on data collection and the ranking and rating of member-countries (Martens 2007; 42). This approach highlights not only the significance of the OECD as an education policy agent, but crucially the emergence of a social *matrix* of interrelated governing actors in Europe, who classify and construct meaning and articulate and diffuse new norms and principles.

One could argue that the commonalities between the two IOs' policy instruments and content might simply reflect the dominance of 'rational choice' principles, such as efficiency and equity. Nevertheless, as already discussed, through the shared construction of indicators and datasets, as well as the numerous common workshops and meetings, one could easily identify a number of specific instances of policy teaching and learning between them. If this is the case, could we then observe a stable relationship or are we witnessing variances in the direction and density of the movement of this 'magistracy of influence' (Lawn and Lingard 2002) in engendering shared processes of problematisation? What are the transformation capacities (Weiss 1998) of the two IOs when they receive policy tools and ideas and how do they adapt them to their own interests and practices? Is the learning process promoted or disrupted by expert players (Tsebelis 2002; Boswell 2009)? For example, organisations like the Council of Europe have long promoted the idea of a social Europe and thus resisted the current emphasis on linking education policy to 'growth and jobs' –is their position peripheral or central in the matrix of policy actors involved in constructing the skills and competencies agenda? Finally, what happens when the EC acquires access to Australian, Canadian and American expertise, or when the OECD meets with European Commission experts? Have OECD politics and policies been changing through relations with external contractors and advisers, as well as the EC itself?

Through the examination of skills and competences, the paper tried to demonstrate the mutual efforts by the two IOs not simply to frame new problems, but in fact share new ideas about how IOs can 'do' education governance in Europe. There is necessity for further research into this joint venture, in order to investigate in depth some of the questions outlined above as well as engender new ones. To the extent that the argument presented here could pinpoint towards some explanation of this transnational enterprise, our attention needs to be directed to two interlinked ideas –policy learning and knowledge politics.

First, the idea of policy learning (Haas and Haas 1995; May 1992; Bennett 1997; Raffe and Spours 2007; Steiner-Khamsi 2004) is central to the understanding of processes of problematisation and normalisation within education governance. It is not limited to the idea of instrumental learning, or learning about new policy tools or interventions; instead, it encompasses an idea of social policy learning which entails 'new or reaffirmed understanding of policy problems and objectives' (May 1992; 334) – the social construction of policy priorities. It also takes account of 'political' learning; this involves processes that take place in advocacy coalitions, such as the one that the paper has suggested between the OECD and EC. On the other hand, the idea of policy teaching (Bomberg 2007) is also significant in that it assumes that the learning of specific policy instruments depends on 'learners' but also on those agents responsible for promoting and inducing that learning. Although it

is important to look at who is learning, what is learned and to what effect, it is equally significant to focus on who is teaching, what is taught and to what effect (Bomberg 2007). It is crucial to investigate the cascading strategies of ‘teachers’, as well as the take-up of ideas by ‘model pupils’ (Rinne 2006).

Secondly, closely interlinked with the idea of policy learning, is the centrality of knowledge in processes of problematisation between the two IOs. Through the examination of PISA and PIAAC, we witness an evolving and progressing consensus based on the co-construction of knowledge, and crucially statistical knowledge, in education. The processes of problematisation are thus rooted in knowledge and expertise and their ever-expanding territories – but this is not to say that knowledge here becomes an uncontrollable force which has acquired a life of its own. On the contrary, it is a social construct heavily managed and steered through a series of expert meetings and exchanges –and this is where policy learning becomes intimately entangled with knowledge politics. These European encounters are not limited within the boundaries of one organisation, or even two, as this paper might have tried to show –sometimes they are not even confined within European boundaries at all. They include a wide range of actors, with different interests and opportunities, which need to be traced every single time one attempts to examine the construction of a policy problem from scratch. Knowledge is the main engine powering the construction of policy problems (what the paper initially described as moving ‘behind’ the problem in order to understand the reasons for its genesis), since numbers can be collated, monitored and interpreted by different states and actors, and even used as a basis for forecasting future needs (Grek, 2008). Knowledge is key here: education policy is heavily dependent on knowledge policy and politics. To a large –and constantly increasing- extent, the management of knowledge appears to determine the orientation of education policy. This is not a neutral, a-political process; rather, it is heavily political and directed. This paper argues that the analysis of *knowledge policy* is crucial in order to explain problematisation and change in education governance in the knowledge society (Grek and Ozga 2009).

Therefore, the relationship between the two IOs is a new knowledge relationship –the interest is not only on what they have been learning through this collaboration, but crucially on the terms on which they have been both involved in this knowledge exchange. During these processes, policy problems are never static, because the knowledge that brings them about constantly increases. In addition, the creation and appropriation of such knowledge is always only temporary –new actors and experts always emerge and demand to control the knowledge game themselves. Technologies and technicians need to become part of the same problem. Consensus-building appears to predate any processes of problematisation –this is the area where the OECD has done expert work, since it managed to bring around the same table very divergent interests and actors. Knowledge is central in this success, because it is the apparent neutrality and objectivity of scientific expertise that permits actors to get involved without risking their claimed authority. During the process and due to the magnitude of the exercise, statistics acquire a new significance, they turn into a spectacle with winners and losers. Thus, policy problems become public issues –the media have been playing a very significant role in this and the communication strategies of IOs and especially the OECD have ensured that they do so.

We need to be alert to the qualities of policy problems when they operate as such performance displays. One could perhaps speculate that, as it currently stands, the PISA phenomenon in Europe might not have managed to have perpetual endurance. Like a meteor, it hits the nation, creates some serious ripple effects, but is as quick to disappear and be forgotten. However, PISA data are necessary now as part of the PIAAC new data dream –both surveys together extend our knowledge backwards and forwards in any one’s life; within the context of lifelong learning, one needs the lifelong monitoring of education. Despite EC’s long-standing policy interest in vocational training, statistical knowledge about skills and competences in Europe was non-existent before. The European Commission had to jump in the OECD’s numbers’ bandwagon, since new indicators and standards – *new problems*- are going to be produced out of the knowledge acquired.

To conclude, this paper argues that the knowledge and policy relationship that has emerged between the OECD and the European Commission is neither superficial nor temporary; rather, it is becoming deeper and relates to wider questions about how one does education governance in Europe today. Policy problems are hard to isolate and examine as they constantly move and change. They have to adopt and adapt. This is what PISA taught the OECD and the education policy and research worlds. Policy problems are *multidimensional*, as they have to fit every country’s ranking position and its politics. They are *temporal*, as they always change and adjust to the wider societal and political sphere (for example, the centrality of skills as a policy priority has been strengthened due to the financial crisis). They are *spatial*, as they have different effects and re-confirm arcs of prosperity (Scandinavia) and arcs of poverty (the Mediterranean). Above all, problems are both *moral* (the equity discourse is always present in policy texts around these issues) and *economistic* (knowledge economy is the major driver behind these shifts). Therefore, we observe that, as they develop, policy problems appear to be constantly creating an all-inclusive and pervasive character for themselves. However, what is the special bond cementing all these different pieces together in such a well-orchestrated game? It seems that knowledge politics (Stehr 2004), and more precisely the management of knowledge in education governance, in conjunction with policy learning, are increasingly becoming the two most influential factors determining processes of problematisation and the setting of new education policy agendas in Europe.

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