

PISA, Power, and Policy: the emergence of global educational governance¹

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The aim of this edited volume is to scrutinize a development in which, according to the editors, the OECD-led (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) PISA Study (Programme for International Student Assessment) is poised to assume a new institutional role as arbiter of global education governance, simultaneously acting as diagnostician, judge and policy advisor to the world's school systems. Applying a perspective of institutionalist researchers, the book seeks to problematize this development and to question PISA as an institution-building force in global education. The introduction to the book departs from the idea that after being adopted and, thus, institutionalized globally, learning assessments such as PISA usurp nation-states' decision-making power on national education policies. Consequently the very meaning of public education, according to the editors, is being recast from a project aimed at forming national citizens and nurturing social solidarity to a project driven by economic demands and labor market orientations. This volume sets as its task the questioning of this development by asking how, and through which interested actors, PISA is being institutionalized as a global educational regime, what key legitimizing assumptions are inherent in this development, and which historical, political and cultural processes have contributed to the rise and institutionalization of PISA. In line with institutionalist thinking, the book also seeks to reveal the potential consequences of this assumed new political regime.

Besides discussing the emergence and institutionalization of PISA and its potential policy consequences, this volume seeks to examine four puzzles or paradoxes that are, according to the editors, inherent in this development. The first relates to the fact that one country (Finland) has allegedly followed OECD's political advice the least yet has repeatedly achieved top scores in PISA. The second paradox is that PISA is a key instrument in the construction of a new governance regime that is widely embraced by the very governing bodies it disempowers. The third paradox concerns the fact that PISA outcomes are typically read as indicative of national education policies and practices, despite evidence that out-

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of-school or non-educational factors rival school-internal ones. The fourth paradox relates to the fact that similar PISA outcomes have triggered dissimilar policy responses on the ground. These paradoxes are dealt with in the 14 chapters of the book. To conclude in the introduction, the editors speculate on two possible futures of the alleged emerging global education governance regime. One possibility is that national education policies and practices will come to be defined merely by a single test, PISA, aiming at collective and commensurable standards, and national systems will lose their cultural diversity. The alternative is that nation-states do not compete for ranks but exchange ideas and borrow practices across borders to find out what is best for their own educational interests. The result of the second scenario would be, according to the editors, diversification and innovation instead of standardization and narrowing of education that, they claim, are especially related to the first scenario. The editors fear that the latter scenario is not the one that currently seems to have the momentum of opinion on its side, but they remain hopeful that the present situation is a contingent phenomenon subject to change.

The strength of the volume undoubtedly lies in its introduction of many new viewpoints to global educational governance research. Bringing an institutional perspective into this body of research is not new as such. That is to say, there is considerable research that has examined, for instance, the role of international governmental organizations (IGOs), especially of the OECD, and their knowledge production in disseminating and institutionalizing images of desired national education systems, thereby contributing to global harmonization of national education policies. However, the way in which this volume focuses on the establishment of the assessment policy practiced by the OECD, particularly the factors that have helped PISA in becoming recognized as a legitimate way to understand the status of national education systems, is quite fresh. In particular, chapters five to eight offer a novel approach to understanding the historical and political factors behind the emergence and institutionalization of the assessment policy of OECD, the relationship of PISA to other international large-scale assessments, as well as the potential effects of this globally assumed assessment thinking on nation-states, other IGOs and other international organizations (IOs). All these chapters share the idea that, unlike other IOs, OECD has managed (partly due to the United States' political pressure) to create an assessment culture that has been unthinkingly accepted and assumed by all nation-states as a legitimate way of weighing the quality of national education systems. This globally institutionalized assessment thinking that is particularly promoted in PISA, aimed at demonstrating efficiency of individual education systems, has according to these chapters sprawled across all nation-states but also to other IOs and their assessment practices. The chapters also make the argument that after PISA is accepted as the only way to understand and evaluate national education systems, nation-states have started to reform their system aggressively so that they may meet, as well as possible, international standards.

Chapters two to four illustrate in an interesting way why Finland, despite its repetitive success in PISA, has not followed the Anglo-Saxon accountability thinking promoted by the OECD. These chapters argue among other things that although the New Public Management discourse is fairly prominent in the national central government documents, municipalities have restrained themselves from implementing studies that could be used to create public school-specific ranking lists. It is argued among other things that the social democratic values that are deeply rooted in the Finnish society have made Finns reluctant to implement policies that might make schools compete with each other.

Chapters nine to thirteen aim to offer alternative ways in which to understand the status of national education systems. While each of these chapters aims to "reinterpret" the reasons behind countries' PISA performance in its own way, they all begin with the premise that national learning outcomes must

be explained by 'out-of-school' factors. The role of cultural and historical factors contributing to national education policies and outcomes is specifically emphasized. In that way, the aim of the chapters is to question the public PISA discourse in which, according to the authors, national learning performances are contemplated only against factors related to the school system. Most of the authors in these chapters also express fears that if national PISA performances are considered and developed only against the indicators applied, and data collected, in PISA assessments, nation-states will endanger the very foundations their education policies and practices have been made on.

My overall assessment of the volume is a positive one. It brings forward many novel ways to understand and examine the emergence and establishment of the global assessment culture promoted in PISA, as well as its potential policy consequences. However, by foreclosing how and to what extent the OECD through its assessment work dictates national education policies and practices, I believe the authors of the volume miss the actual processes and practices through which the global synchronization of national policies takes place. In other words, the ways in which international comparative data infiltrates national spheres and how the policy ideas mediated through the data are integrated into domestic policy discourses have gone unexplored. I think that this the main gap in this book.

I do not want to deny the potential steering effect of PISA and the OECD. However, in order to understand the actual mechanisms through which IGOs such as the OECD may exert influence, it would be fruitful to complement existing theories - here, the institutionalist perspective - with frameworks and approaches that open up the actual processes in which global policy ideas are integrated into national policy discourses. This is done especially in the studies applying domestication framework, which also draws on a neoinstitutionalist perspective. However, unlike most institutionalist theories, the domestication approach departs from the idea that there are no power relations between nation-states or IOs that have the authority to steer national policies. It emphasizes that such an understanding of power originates from the idea of power in the state framework, according to which there are some dominant actors inside the nation-states who can impose their will on others, thus steering national policies. According to domestication scholars, this kind of understanding of power as a hierarchical structure, i.e. as one's property or privilege to impose its will on others, is easily transferred from the state level to the global level by arguing that just as within the nation-states, so too at the global level there are also some authoritative actors who can determine the direction of future policies. The domestication framework stresses that such an understanding of power does not hold in contemporary societies. If anything, it argues that contemporary societies must be defined in a global framework and this world society consists of nation-states that are managed increasingly through epistemic governance. Governance of this sort works by making actors perceive the world and the current challenges similarly.

Hence, in contrast to most institutionalist perspectives, the domestication framework approaches the phenomenon of global educational governance from bottom up. It emphasizes that it is particularly due to local actors and their creative uses of international comparisons that IGOs gain their agentive capacity and through which global ideas pervade national spheres. Domestication scholars argue that the evaluation information proffered by the OECD, such as what PISA conveys to us, is one of the obvious devices by means of which various actors in national contexts become aware of the state of the systems in their own countries and of how their systems are positioned in relation to other systems. Such rankings also serve to disseminate notions of desirable systems and are taken on board in national contexts, with the result that national policies are synchronized with global trends. However, according to the domestication approach, this local adoption of global policy ideas is not about ritual enactment. If anything, the litera-

ture argues, in the policy-making processes where domestic actors make use of international comparative data to develop their own systems, actors' own political desires are also always involved. Local actors do not just react to exogenous policy models in order to promote the best interests of their own country. Rather, they resort to international comparative data to further their own objectives in domestic politics. Through considered rhetoric, local players direct their fellow citizens' attention to policies in other countries or to practices already existing in their own country, thus constructing distinct models or presenting evidence of their success. Through these local accounts, global policy ideas mesh with the interest and motives of the local actors whereby the exogenous origin of the idea originally put forward in the global context disappears and they come to be seen primarily as domestic. The new policy may even be considered a characteristic feature of the nation and promoted to other countries, hence reproducing the cycle of global social change.

In contrast to most institutionalist theories, the domestication framework also stresses the point that although domestic policy-making is in many ways informed by choices made in other countries, paradoxically it does not undermine but rather reproduces people's identification with the nation as a sovereign entity. According to studies informed by domestication, in situations where nation-states watch other countries and their apparently successful practices, they still do not construct themselves as conformists or imitators. If anything, according to these studies national policy-making is generally viewed as an independent act of the state, and policies are considered to be domestically shaped. Consequently, they are not regarded as inauthentic copies from elsewhere or as superimposed limits on people's freedom and sovereignty, but rather as signs of a national trajectory.

Including this kind of perspective to the global educational governance research in this volume, the general argument put forward would have been more nuanced. I suggest that by complementing existing case analyses with those informed by domestication, the editors (and readers) might have noticed that global governance is not about gaining or losing power. Instead, as suggested by domestication literature, it is about a process in which different parties are engaged in negotiations defining appropriate rationalities or necessary policy decisions. National interest groups are parties to these processes when they take their stance on what is to be pursued in the national education policy context. On the other hand, the OECD is also a party to these processes. By providing information on what desirable or efficient national systems are, the organization furthers our understanding of what might be desirable policy in our own country. The final policy outcome depends, however, as numerous other studies have shown, on local developments, in which all kinds of counter-discourses are mobilized to negotiate the shape of national policy reforms. Consequently, as emphasized by domestication scholars, the end result may be a far cry from the original ideals (as promoted by the OECD) and there may be considerable differences between countries in which the same policy idea or model has been introduced.

Another gap in this volume relates to the definition of institutionalism. As the existing literature shows, institutionalism has taken different focuses and draws its inspiration from very different disciplines. Surprisingly enough, the editors of the volume do not refer to these different sub-field of institutionalism. Nor do they make explicit on which institutionalist perspective their approach draws on.

These reservations do not defeat the contributions made in this volume in highlighting some of the ways in which large-scale learning assessments such as PISA affect national education policies.