A European Politics of Education proposes a sociology of education establishing connections between empirical data coming from European-scale comparative surveys, normative assumptions structuring actors' representations and interpretative judgements, and a specific focus on lifelong learning policy areas. It invites readers to think about the place of standards, expertise and calculations in the European space from a common perspective, supported by a tradition of critical sociology and European political studies.

The book:

- addresses an important agenda: how the policies and politics of supranational Europe are making a European educational space;
- contains a response to the emergence of new epistemic governance and instruments at European level;
- contains contributions from the EU and the UK, which give a comprehensive selection of perspectives and analysis of the field as it concerns Europe.

The complexity of the contemporary European education policy space is addressed here with new lines of inquiry as well as a reflexive outlook, on standardisation, policy-making and actor engagement. Students and researchers of European policy studies, education policy analysts and theorists will all be particularly interested readers.

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The European policy space for education describes the emergence of a dense web of relations, data and people. Its speed and scale has been transformed by the push for a competitive Europe through the Lisbon Process, and by using a common set of benchmarks and networks, to governing European education through comparison.

This series intends to create a space for scholars of European education policies and politics in education studies, political science, sociology and European integration studies, and to develop interpretive studies about new European institutions, and the interplay between policy-makers, stakeholders and experts. The series encourages research on education and its links with mobility, migration, finance, standardisation and norms, knowledge and governing, and new technologies and software.

Shaping of European Education
Interdisciplinary approaches
Edited by Martin Lawn and Romuald Normand

Governing by Inspection
Edited by Sotiris Grek and Joakim Lindgren

A European Politics of Education
Perspectives from sociology, policy studies and politics
Edited by Romuald Normand and Jean-Louis Derouet
Chapter 4

The praise of mutual surveillance in Europe

Luis Miguel Carvalho and Estela Costa

Introduction

In 2002, on introducing the book Fabricating Europe, Nóvoa and Lawn (2002: 1) referred to the emergence of a ‘European educational space’ resulting from crossing a variety of discourses and practices of a plurality of actors and actants – ‘national state collaboration, European Union guidelines and products, academic networks, social movements, business links and sites, city ‘states’, virtual connections’ – in short, as a result of a diffuse and polycentric movement. After more than a decade, the programme for international student assessment (PISA) – the international performance comparison of educational systems prepared since the mid-nineties (and launched at the turn of the century) by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) – could well be included in this bundle of discourses, practices, actors and objects that structure and that restructure European education space. Currently, this larger scale international comparative assessment, and the comparability that it promotes, seems to pervade multiple European policy and politics contexts: to galvanise disputes or to legitimise policies; to set targets; to build assessment tools at a national level; only to mention a few significant applications.

This chapter addresses the uses and effects of PISA in the imagination and the scrutiny of educational problems and solutions in Europe and, concomitantly, its participation in the creation of a European policy space in education (Lawn and Grek 2012). It builds on previous work that shows PISA as a knowledge-policy instrument (Carvalho 2012); that is, as a tool that combines sophisticated comparative assessment techniques with a set of representations about education and a philosophy of (transnational and national) regulation of education policies and practices. In addition, the descriptions and analysis developed in this chapter draw on previous literature that depicts comparability as a mode of European governance (Nóvoa 2002, 2012) and the OECD as an indirect strong agent of the Europeanisation in education (Lawn and Grek 2012; Grek 2014). We summarise these inputs in the following paragraphs.
PISA, the OECD's self-portrayed quality monitoring tool, is here understood as a device that embraces and conveys different ways of imagining (and doing) education and the governing of education and that simultaneously plays a part in the coordination of education policies and public action (Carvalho 2012: 173). Moreover, PISA is envisaged as a knowledge-based and knowledge-oriented regulation instrument (Van Zanten 2011: 83); it draws on knowledge "but also produces[] and diffuse[] knowledge in order to shape the behavior of actors in a given policy domain". Therefore, PISA exemplifies the presence, in the contemporary policy processes, of soft forms of regulation that favor information and persuasion (and acting through the actors' reflexivity) instead of command and control (Lascombes and Le Galès 2007).

Comparability was one of the 'main tenets' of the European educational policy emerging since the mid-1990s (Nóvoa 2002). Also, the comparability associated to the dissemination of best practices, and the boosting of activities aimed at the creation and adoption of indicators and benchmarks that are likely to be monitored still is a main tenet of European education policy, as the ET 2020 programme relies deeply on the rationale followed in its 'predecessor' – ET 2010 (Nóvoa 2012). The four action verbs that circumscribe the intervention of the European Commission (EC) characterise this form of soft regulation that has been set in motion: 'identifying (common goals); spreading (good practices); measuring (the results); comparing (the developments and policies)' (Nóvoa et al. 2014: 275).

Parallel to the importance of comparability comes the close collaboration with the OECD, developed over the past 10 years (Grek 2014). Put in different terms, the monopoly of competence developed by the OECD on the competencies of literacy has found a favourable ecology at the European Commission (EC). It can therefore be seen as an expression of the 'expansions' of PISA over the past decade: amplifications of the geopolitical scope, the objects assessed (number and focus of the surveys), and the partnerships involved (Carvalho 2012); enriching the scope (broadening the set of skills and competencies) and the scale (covering more countries, systems and schools), and improving the explanatory power of the assessment (Sellar and Lingard 2014). This is an expansion that involves the construction of a 'social matrix of interrelated governing actors' (Grek 2014: 401). The important thing, though, for the present text is that the interdependence between the EU and the OECD fosters the creation of the European education space as a governable space of comparison and commensurability (Nóvoa and Lawn 2002; Lawn and Grek 2012; Normand and Derouet 2016).

Drawing on the outlined contributions, this chapter focuses on the active reception and the political uses of PISA data/information/knowledge, at national and supranational arenas, in order to enrich our understanding about the role of knowledge-based and knowledge-oriented regulation instruments in constructing the European policy space. Overall, the chapter depicts the fabrication of chains of 'mutual surveillance practices': the development at a national and European level of policies regulated by a comparative logic, and supported by data resulting from a particular larger scale international comparative assessment.

The chapter proceeds in the following manner. The first section is based on a review of the literature on PISA receptions and effects in European contexts, more precisely of papers on the national receptions and effects of PISA in European countries, published in English language academic journals between 2000 and 2014. The text highlights and discusses two concomitant features of PISA participation in the contemporary policy process: the different uses and interpretations of PISA; the attraction it transversely achieves in diverse social worlds (policy-makers, experts, high administration agencies and media) with diverse interests and perspectives. In short, the section emphasises the 'the aggregation effect' (Lascombes and Le Galès 2007) that PISA accomplishes in European countries. The second section of the chapter describes and analyses the densification of the relations between EC/the Directorate General for Education and Culture (DGEC) and OECD/PISA and the reception of PISA results at the EU level, and the agenda-setting, role-setting and rule-following initiatives built upon it. These initiatives are observed as part of the reinforcement of vertical processes deployed in the social and cognitive construction of a European education space and a European policy space in education.

PISA active reception and effects on educational policies

Over the past decade several studies, ranging from a single country analysis to a multiple countries analysis, have examined the active receptions and the effects of PISA texts and objects at national and supranational policy-making levels. Those studies say much about the diverse uses of PISA in public policies and in other social worlds of education: the multiple purposes assigned and the wide range of policies connected to PISA, the selection and (re)contextualisation of data/information/knowledge provided by PISA and the social, cultural and political factors related to the plurality of active uses and responses. But they also depict a transversal phenomena – or 'crossing effects' – associated with the use of PISA for the imagination, scrutiny and steering of educational systems, policies and practices. In the next pages we identify, describe and discuss these major trends.

With multiple purposes, in multiple policies

The extent, the intensity and the depth of PISA reception varies between countries and within each country over time. Even more, the reception
is characterised by the assignation of multiple purposes to PISA texts and objects, particularly of legitimisation, information and idealisation.

Thus, PISA is associated with the legitimisation of ongoing or new, sometimes potentially controversial, reforms (Afonso and Costa 2009; Berényi and Neumann 2009; Bonal and Tarabini 2013; Ertl 2006; Gregor 2012; Grek 2009; Pons 2012; Rautalin and Alasuuari 2007; Sellar and Lingard 2013), as well as with the legitimisation of knowledge-based regulatory instruments previously developed by national authorities (Grek et al. 2009). Distinctly, PISA is seen as a primary, or a supplementary, source of information for the steering of educational systems, by compensating the lack of national sources, adding or reassessing the existing ones (Afonso and Costa 2009; Berényi and Neumann 2009; Bieber and Martens 2010). Finally, PISA is understood to be supporting the construction of diverse educational ideals, projections or narratives, about education and educational reform (Afonso and Costa 2009; Berényi and Neumann 2009; Dobkins and Martens 2012; Grek 2012; Grek et al. 2009; Mons and Pons 2009; Neumann et al. 2012; Pettersson 2014); and nurturing new advocacy coalitions (see Dobkins and Martens 2012; Ertl 2006).

The variety of policies held with reference to PISA is also noticeable. Curriculum is the more conspicuous area, from the syllabuses to the organisational structures, from the focus on competences to changes in school schedules (Afonso and Costa 2009; Berényi and Neumann 2009; Bieber and Martens 2011; Ertl 2006; Mangez and Cattonar 2009; Dobkins and Martens 2012). Then, it is possible to display a large list of policy areas where PISA is invoked: student assessments’ rationales and instruments (Berényi and Neumann 2009); quality standards and national assurance measures (Bieber and Martens 2011; Ertl 2006); priority action programmes targeting inequality and segregation issues (Afonso and Costa 2009; Berényi and Neumann 2009; Ertl 2006); initial and in-service teacher education curricula (Afonso and Costa 2009; Ertl 2006; Mangez and Cattonar 2009; Ringarp and Rothland 2010); school management and school evaluation policies (Bonal and Tarabini 2013; Mangez and Cattonar 2009; Ringarp and Rothland 2010; Dobkins and Martens 2012) and national school network restructuring (Berényi and Neumann 2009). Finally, and perhaps more importantly, specific programmes have been undertaken to promote literacy levels in PISA assessed competences (Bonal and Tarabini 2013; Ertl 2006; Afonso and Costa 2009).

Context-specific and transnational dynamics

Several authors point out the selective processes involved in these prolific mobilisations of PISA data. For instance, it seems clear that only some of the policy domains addressed by PISA ‘recommendations’ – equity, national school structures and standards, teacher training, quality assurance, school autonomy, educational research and statistics (Bieber and Martens 2011) – are taken into account. Moreover, when an intense mobilisation of PISA occurs, only some domains are considered and, what is most significant, others are completely ignored (Bonal and Tarabini 2013; Gregor 2012; Grek 2009; Neumann et al. 2012; Ringarp and Rothland 2010). Finally, the knowledge/information/data actually mobilised in public debates or by policy makers is reduced and it is often transformed into a limited number of simplified statements (Mangez and Hilgers 2012). Apart from selection, ideas such as appropriation, re-contextualisation and translation are recurrently put forward in the literature to emphasise the active reception of PISA. Some authors refer to the appropriation and re-politicisation of knowledge in line with pre-existing agendas (Afonso and Costa 2009; Bonal and Tarabini 2013). Other authors identify the translation of circulating texts into local terminologies and problems (Neumann et al. 2012), and others the creation, under certain circumstances, of specific bodies of knowledge for policy, by combining scientific, technical and political ingredients with specific explanations about PISA results (Mons and Pons 2009; Pons 2012).

The social, cultural and political factors related to the plurality of active uses and responses to PISA is one of the most open to discussion issues concerning the analysis of PISA reception. Nonetheless, it is possible to identify in the literature some major factors, like the path and the trends of national education systems, the present cultural and political features of the reception contexts and the characteristics of the assessment and the credibility of the OECD. The existence of previous reform efforts is largely documented as a very important element (Berényi and Neumann 2009; Bieber and Martens 2011; Steiner-Khamsi 2003), but other characteristics are recognised. Some, of structural nature – for instance, the degree of centralisation/homogenisation and homogeneity/heterogeneity of each educational system (Bieber and Martens 2011), or the socioeconomic position of the country in the EU (Bonal and Tarabini 2013) – others, of a cultural nature, like the educational evaluation and assessment traditions, in the academy, in high-level state bureaucracy or in the professions of education (Carvalho 2012; Dobkins and Martens 2012; Grek 2009; Mons and Pons 2009; Pons 2012), the attitudes towards international comparisons as (valid) resources for the administration of education systems, and the orientation of policy-makers and their staff concerning evidence-based policies (see Afonso and Costa 2009; Berényi and Neumann 2009; Dobkins and Martens 2012; Pons 2012). Studies also point out the dynamics of national politics (Grek et al. 2009; Dobkins and Martens 2012; Pons 2012; Sellar and Lingard 2013) and the contingent needs to revitalise or to block problems/solutions carried by PISA results, as well as to the degree of 'mediatisation' of PISA results, thus stressing the issues of the 'resonance' of PISA data at the ongoing national debates, and the resulting legitimisation needs (see Bieber and Martens 2011; Steiner-Khamsi 2003, Gregor 2012; Mangez and Cattonar 2009). Finally, individual agency may
also be emphasised: the 'capacity' of policy actors and systems to transform external pressures into concrete processes of reform (Dobbins and Martens 2012); the agency of policy brokers, namely the PISA national representatives and experts (Neumann et al., 2012), or other mediators (Bonal and Tarabini 2013). PISA-related factors are also relevant. The impact of PISA results is recognised per se, their variations along the cycles, and the sense of crisis induced by the results (Dobbins and Martens 2012; Gregor 2012; Ringarp and Rothland 2010; Walder et al. 2014), as well as the importance of specific characteristics of PISA (when compared with other international comparative assessments), like its regularity, geopolitical scope and the singularity of the object of inquiry (Carvalho 2012, following Bottani 2006), and the deep-rooted 'centrality', for the school systems, of the subjects examined (Steiner-Khamsi 2003). Finally, the OECD status and strategies should also be considered: its credibility as a purveyor of expert independent knowledge (Bieber and Martens, 2011; Carvalho, 2012; Grek et al. 2009; Rautalin and Alssuutari 2009) and the 'impetus' of OECD interventions (Bieber and Martens 2011), particularly the OECD strategies of communication in the media (Mangez and Cattonar 2009; Mons and Pons 2009).

As evidenced in the preceding paragraphs PISA objects/texts are re-interpreted, made acceptable and efficient for specific sociocognitive contexts, and each context may exhibit different abilities and knowledge resources and circumstances in which to do so. However, along with such a multiplicity of uses, a few commonalities are also patent in PISA reception, such as the fabrication/legitimation of new governing modes, the naturalisation of mutual surveillance as a way of governing, and the redefinition of reference societies. We address these issues in the next section.

'Crossing effects' and 'new geographies'

Associated with PISA texts and objects diffusion/reception is the fabrication and legitimisation of new governing modes: the adoption of evidence-based approaches (Afonso and Costa 2009; Berényi and Neumann 2009; Dobbins and Martens 2012), even if 'only' a phony adoption (Gregor 2012; Pons 2012) or a kind of a 'categorical' script for policy-making (Mangez and Cattonar 2009); the use of international comparisons as external legitimisation resources (Bonal and Tarabini 2013; Mons and Pons 2009; Dobbins and Martens 2012; Grek 2009) and an increased engagement in policy learning and policy borrowing approach (Dobbins and Martens 2012; Ertl 2006), although sometimes within incomplete borrowing and superficial learning processes (Ringarp and Rothland 2010), and not necessarily conducting to a deeper rationalisation of policy-making processes (Mangez and Cattonar 2009; Mangez and Hilgern 2012; Pons 2012); the creation of new assessment structures and the reshaping of the pre-existing balances between centralised and decentralised administration (Ertl 2006; Grek 2009); the introduction and the development of instruments for the monitoring of education systems, either on a national scale (Berényi and Neumann 2009; Bieber and Martens 2011; Ertl 2006; Neumann et al. 2012), or on a supranational level (Grek 2010); the emergence, in the media and public sphere, of international comparative assessments as a 'third evaluator' between the state and the civil society, as a source to scrutinise the 'evaluative state' on behalf of the public interest (Mangez and Cattonar 2009). These manifestations may be related to deep changes in national evaluative cultures (Neumann et al. 2012) but more broadly they are part of the institutionalisation of governing modes based and oriented to data/information/knowledge production, thus strengthening the hypothesis that new forms of governing are connected with new ways of knowing (Nökö and Yariv-Mashal 2003; Ozga 2008).

Despite the persistent existence of critical voices, PISA is usually perceived by political actors as capable of raising public awareness about education systems, and capable of helping to identify problems and provide good examples, and as accurately portraying the performance of education systems, their weaknesses and strengths. As recently argued, PISA is a kind of meta-policy, 'a policy that frames the possibilities and expectations of, and sets limits to, what can count as policy' (Dale and Robertson 2014: 226). Thus, PISA data and analysis open and close routes and establish a set of possibilities for policies, and its power lies in keeping actors referring to it or using it for the imagination and/or the scrutiny of educational systems, policies and practices. Ultimately, the reported uses of PISA legitimate the centrality of the knowledge for policy generated by the OECD (Carvalho 2012; Grek 2009, 2012).

International comparative assessments are driving new practices of relation with the 'other' and of guiding policies through relating with the 'other' in the making of educational policies (Nökö et al. 2014; Steiner-Khamsi 2012). A particular way of seeing these injunctions is exposed in papers that address and discuss the use of PISA in the continual process of governing through the country's location in a competitive world space, and the reconfiguration of reference societies (e.g. Bonal and Tarabini 2013; Carvalho and Costa 2014; Grek et al. 2009; Ringarp and Rothland 2010; Sellars and Lingard 2013; Walder et al. 2014).

In a recent paper, based on empirical data from six case studies on the reception of PISA in six European countries, we have noticed that the specificities of the reception contexts are still important for understanding the diversity of 'reference societies' invoked in domestic debates about educational systems in each PISA cycle (Carvalho and Costa 2014). Yet, one might have to consider seriously the existence of more direct PISA effects regarding the societies taken as reference points for the reflection on education systems. This direct effect has multiple expressions: the 'other' that ranks the top of the league tables; the 'other' that is taken into account because they made progress; the 'other' taken as a role-models of seriousness in the way they
handled the PISA results; the ‘other’ who is seen as sharing the same educational problems (as evidenced by PISA categories and indicators).

From what has been said, we suggest that around PISA occurs an updating of the reference societies. Moreover, in the six European cases examined, these re-updates are made generally by invoking European countries (and exceptions often result from a rhetorical dramatisation that is the invocation of countries with non-equivalent positions – and therefore incomparable – in the world). This trend, albeit tenuous, supported by studies, allows us to speculate that we are facing the imaginary activation of a common space.

**PISA active reception and effects at the European level**

What happens if we change our observation from individual countries to the reception of PISA at an EU level? That is what we deal with in the next section, focused on the relationship that is being built between the EU and the OECD and on the mobilisation and/or integration of PISA in the EU political processes. Firstly, we will try to clear up and identify the main ideas that are conveyed in data that highlight the intensification of relations between the OECD and the EU. Secondly, we will proceed to an interpretative analysis in the European documents of references to the OECD and PISA.

**The densification of relations between the EC and the OECD**

We capture the densification of relations in a wide range of sources: the European legislation (Official Journal of the European Union) and other EU documents (memorandums, press releases, executive summaries and disseminating brochures); public speeches from members of the DGEEC; reports published by the EC (elaborated within the framework of the ET 2020 monitoring procedures, and those resulting from the European policy networks and working group); and in new European instruments and initiatives documentation/websites. The data provided consolidated the idea that the intensification of ties between the two bodies (EU/OECD) is a growing reality, which can be seen from two key aspects: the adoption of the framework of literacy to discuss education in Europe and the use of PISA (rationale or data) as a source for new European monitoring devices. We will, then, analyse each of the referred aspects.

**Adopting the literacy framework to discuss education in Europe**

The literacy framework plays a primary role in the European debate on education and in the establishment of European targets. The highest expression of this are the targets set for the European education and training 2020 framework, with PISA influencing the formulation of the European standards related with low achievement in reading, maths and science (European Commission, DGEAC 2013: 1). In addition to supporting the Europe 2020 targets, the importance attributed to PISA literacy turns out to be reflected in different aspects of the European policy, as evidenced in the EC adoption of (PISA’s) literacy as an area of concern. In fact, the ‘problem’ of literacy leads to the creation, within the EU, of a working group on literacy, which developed a multi-layer approach to literacy, related to numeracy and other competences in broad terms to levels defined in the OECD’s PISA (European Commission 2012b: 13). Similarly to the process of enlarging the scope of literacy by widening the skills and competencies observed at the OECD level (Sellan and Lingard 2014) different literacies emerge in the context of Europe, such as the digital literacy, the entrepreneurial literacy (whose data were collected for the first time in PISA, 2015) and adult literacy. The latter, and as already examined by Grek (2010), discloses an assembly of interdependence between the two entities, and became part of the European agenda, to the point of imagining the development of literacy programmes at work by employers and other ‘social partners’ (European Commission 2012a: 12).

The adoption of (OECD’s) literacy as a ‘problem’ may be seen as an example of a policy alignment between the EU and OECD. For some, PISA may only be present as a proof of the quality of the EC policies – ‘The report is consistent with the Commission’s policy: increasing the quality of education and raising skills levels is a smart investment and a powerful way of combating inequalities in our societies’ (EC Press Release 2014); however, the EC alignment with the OECD is repeated successively at different moments and places, and disclosed by the same commissioner in the Erasmus+ launch conference, when legitimising the launching of Erasmus+ with PISA data:

Together with our Member States we have agreed that early school leaving is an urgent priority; therefore Erasmus+ will share the best solutions from across Europe. We have identified poor reading skills as a serious problem; Erasmus+ will fund new cross border projects to tackle it. (…). We know that we need to open up education to new technologies; Erasmus+ will support better use of ICT for learners and teachers. Our vocational training systems are too often failing our young people; Erasmus+ will help to modernise them (…).

(European Conference: 2014)

The alignment on education and training policies is also visible in widely published documents. An example is the brochure ‘Preparing for life – How the European Commission supported education, youth, culture and sport (2010–2014)’, which is exemplary in the way it shows how the EU intends to reinforce collaboration with the various member countries and the OECD:

Over the last 5 years we have deepened pan-European cooperation in higher education and vocational training, making it easier for students
and teachers to compare courses and qualifications; created new tools for measuring progress and promoting transparency; extended cooperation with the OECD so that we better analyze education outcomes; and delivered policy strategies on early childhood education and care, early school leaving, vocational training, rethinking skills and open education resources.

(European Commission/DGEC 2014b: 5)

Moreover, to prove the pooling of efforts between the EC and the OECD, the PISA 2012 results were, for the first time, officially presented in a joint EC/OECD event, in Brussels, as it has happened with the launch of the results of the Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC), a building block of the two institutions' enhanced cooperation (European Commission/EUROGO 2013: 2).

**PISA as a source for monitoring instruments**

The densification of the relationship between the OECD and the EU can also be observed through the relevance that PISA (rational and/or data) has in European monitoring processes. For instance, under the ‘European semester’ initiative, the EU’s annual cycle of economic policy guidance and surveillance, PISA is presented as:

an important component of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020) and a prominent source of information for the Europe 2020 strategy and the European Semester, where it is widely used in fields as literacy, mathematics, early leavers from education and training, low achievers and ICT skills.

(European Commission/DGEC 2013: 2)

The importance and dependence on comparability find themselves strengthened since the EC has intensified and sophisticated the practices of rule-following. At present times, the education and training monitor is perhaps the most relevant monitoring strategy/device in use by the EC for the sector of education, and is a good example of this intensification of the EC’s participation in monitoring the national policies (see Nóvoa 2012). In this coordination and control instrument, where data and figures, benchmarks and targets – generated by diverse organisations – mix and complement each other, PISA and the OECD’s other international surveys and comparisons (like TALIS and PIAAC) have a relevant presence. As reminded by the European Director-General for Education and Culture in the forward to its third edition, the device is as an example of the ‘close cooperation’ with the OECD through several programmes (European Commission/DGEC 2014a: 3).

Furthermore, PISA and PIAAC are being used as a legitimising source of the European initiatives ‘rethinking education’, the ‘Entrepreneurship360 project’, both focused on developing entrepreneurial education, and both deploying monitoring processes. ‘Rethinking education’ (COM 2012) is a country-monitoring initiative set up in 2012 to monitor the progress of institutions. It was carried out with the OECD, in the area of skills policies, ‘to guide and advance the development of entrepreneurial education institutions at all levels including schools and vocational education and training’ (COM 2012: 4). In 2013, the EC launched the public portal ‘education and skills online assessment’ in order to allow ‘individuals and enterprises, through the PIAAC methodology, to benchmark skills against other survey users’ (COM 2012: 16). As for the ‘Entrepreneurship360 project’, it is a new ‘self-assessment’ tool created with the OECD, in 2014, with the aim of nurturing entrepreneurship as a key competence in schools and technical and vocational institutions (European Commission/DGEC 2014c: 81).

**References to the OECD in EU documents and events**

In this part of the chapter, we held an interpretative analysis of the references to the OECD/PISA in European documents. Following the methodological approach developed by Alfsuari (2009), we discovered three major trends regarding the presence of the OECD and PISA: the comparability between the OECD and the EU; the presentation of the OECD as a body of expertise; and the diffusion and endorsement of OECD models and recommendations.

**Comparability between the OECD/EU**

The OECD has an assiduous presence in EU documents, frequently being referenced on a comparative basis to analyse results and legitimise statements. This comparative atmosphere that dominates the tone of the European narratives on education is deeply present in very diverse places, such as press releases, memorandums, official speeches, reports and in published documents, and is used mainly to analyse the performance of the member states and is very much associated with the ESI 2020 and the EU indicators:

The latest PISA (...) found that, among EU countries, 22.1% are low achievers in maths, 17.8% in reading and 16.6% in science. Although these figures represent a slight improvement on previous years, the EU average masks significant differences between Member States. For example, the share of low achievers in maths is over 40% in Bulgaria, Romania and Cyprus, compared with only 10.5% in Estonia, 12.3% in Finland and 14.4% in Poland.

(EC Memo 2014)
Sometimes the analysis takes on a diachronic dimension, relating to member countries and non-European countries, and expanding beyond the European context, thereby spreading the exercise of comparability:

The findings reveal that ten Member States (BG, CZ, DE, EE, IE, HR, LV, AT, PL and RO) have achieved significant progress in diminishing their share of low achievers across all three basic skills since 2009. But five EU countries (EL, HU, SK, FI, SE) have seen an increase in the number of low achievers. Other Member States achieved mixed results (see table). Overall, EU performance is slightly better than the United States, but both lag behind Japan.

(EC Press Release 2013)

However, the OECD is also used for feeding the monitoring processes, as exemplified by the following quote, which uses data from two PISA cycles (2003 and 2009) to describe the trajectory of a specific issue: the size of schools.

In comparison with PISA 2003 (...), in half of the countries studied, the mean size of schools increased by 50 to 100 students, while a decrease of more than 70 students per school can be seen in Belgium (German-speaking Community), Austria, Poland. A greater decline was recorded in Latvia where the mean school size fell by 30% (205 students). As a general tendency, between 2003 and 2009 student numbers in the larger schools in Europe fell slightly.

(EACEA 2012: 36)

It is under the ‘European education and training 2020 framework’ (2009/C 119/02) that comparison is used most to fuel statements and political discourse by the European authorities, specifically those related to the ET 2020 benchmarks:

PISA shows that four of Europe’s Member States (EE, FI, PL and NL) are among the top 7 performing countries in the world in mathematics. These countries are already below the EU benchmark of 15%. The proportion of low achievers across the EU is lower than that found in the USA (26%). (...) Another encouraging finding is that the EU as a whole is on its way to reaching the EU-wide benchmark of having fewer than 15% low achievers in reading and science by 2020.

(EC Speech 2013)

Furthermore, this type of comparison is used in press releases to render account and monitor the performances in the main literacies. The following example regards the EU performances in reading in the 2006 and

2009 PISA cycles in comparison to 2012 and the ET 2020 15 per cent benchmark:

Reading: The percentage of low achievers in reading has declined from 23.1% in 2006 and 19.7% in 2009 to 17.8% in 2012. If this trend continues, the 15% benchmark may be achievable by 2020. So far, only seven EU countries have reached this benchmark (EE, IE, PL, FI, NL, DE and DK). Notable progress has been achieved by CZ, DE, EE, IE, HR, LT, LU, AT, PL and RO.

(EC Press Release 2013)

The OECD as a body of expertise

A recurring widespread idea is that policies need to have a reliable and rational basis. Indeed, the evidence-based narrative is widely disseminated, like a hallmark and it is steeped in most institutional and formal documents of the EU, as in the case of the framework of ET 2020, which highlights the importance of ‘evidence and data from all relevant European agencies, European networks, and international organisations’ (Official Journal of the European Union 2009).

The evidence-based trend of the EU nourishes (and is nourished by) the OECD’s image as a knowledge provider. This can be directly observed in public speeches of the members of the DGEAC:

PISA is an example of the kind of partnership we need if we want to combine expertise, knowledge and resources for the benefit of all Member States and to improve the contribution of education to bringing our societies back to a path of growth and jobs.

(EC Speech 2013)

A more indirect way of doing this is to consider that the content of the OECD report meets European policy, as one might observe in the launch of PISA 2012 – “PISA results strengthen the knowledge base of the Commission and, given the prominence and credibility of the international survey, give the Commission’s own policy messages more visibility” (European Commission/DGEAC 2013: 2) – or at the launch of the OECD’s Education at a Glance: ‘This report is a major source of knowledge and evidence for policy-makers; it contributes to increasing our understanding of the challenges we face’ (EC Press Release 2014).

However, PISA and the OECD are also repeatedly mentioned within European networks and within concrete intervention devices where they are widely propagated, as exemplified in KeyCoNet (a European policy network focused on identifying and analysing initiatives on the implementation of key competences in primary and secondary school education):
When such an evidence-based approach is used, what are the outcomes and where evaluations exist what do we learn from them? The intention is to analyse international influences, such as how the latest PISA student data has impacted on various countries’ formulation of key competence policy, also looking closely at a very pertinent OECD working paper (…) concerning how diverse stakeholders at various levels are involved in curriculum innovations in different countries.

(Arjomand et al. 2013: 3)

Necessarily, the credibility of the OECD and PISA is fostered in monitoring processes where the mobilisation of data from multiple sources is recurrent, but especially the OECD and its devices. This is the case with Key Data on Education in Europe.

Based on data collected through the Eurydice network, Eurostat and the PISA international (…). We hope that this body of data and information will serve as a valuable source for decision makers in the field of education, helping them in reviewing and reforming their educational policies and institutions (…).

(EACEA 2012: 8)

In sum, the way the EC references the OECD is related, mainly, to the assignment to the agency of an image of credibility, objectivity and expertise. In fact, this idea of a data provider is the one that subsists more clearly and helps to strengthen the EC’s ‘appetite’ for evidence-based policies.

OECD models and recommendations

In the EC universe of action, there are many references to the lessons that the PISA data provide. The texts always tend to follow an ‘evidence-consequence sequence’ with evidence being examined in a logic of the implications and repercussions on education policy. Moreover, analyses are developed as ‘learned lessons’. The repeated scheme goes as follows: (a) the diagnosis given by statistics allows ‘to take lessons’ and ‘learn something’, i.e. PISA data enable the EC to verify ‘the necessity of…’; and (b) the ‘existence’ of such learning process (and learned lessons) makes it possible to make recommendations to member states.

The idea underneath that OECD (PISA) data allow the realisation of something, to find out something and learn about that, is part of a narrative that occupies the speeches of European high officials.

PISA 2012 found that the difference in mathematics performances within countries is generally even greater than that between countries

(…) This observation points to the need to address inequalities between different regions and schools within the same country. Lessons learned from certain high-performing regions within a country may then provide valuable pointers for successful policy interventions (…). (EC Speech 2013)

The evidence-consequence sequence is found in very different moments and places, such as under the ‘education semester’ monitoring processes:

The average score of low achieving students in maths in Member States has essentially remained the same in PISA 2012 (22.1%) in comparison to PISA 2009 (22.3%), which means that EU countries should considerably step up their efforts towards reducing the share of low achievement in mathematics.

(European Commission/DGEC 2014c: 42)

Or in the launch of PISA 2012:

Six main findings from PISA 2012 can be summarised from a preliminary analysis, each with its own implications for education and training policies. 1. When it comes to progress towards the 2020 benchmark of at most 15% low achievers, the EU as a whole is seriously lagging behind in the area of mathematics. Significant policy reform will be required in order to break with this stagnation.

(European Commission/DGEC 2013: 1)

The importance of PISA in the construction of the content of recommendations to the member states also appears abundantly, in subtle ways, in the form of best practices indicated by PISA and that member states should follow; as put forward in the Education and Training Monitor 2014, regarding several domains: teachers training and careers, students at risk, curriculum, student behavioural management; parental engagement, allocation of resources (European Commission/DGEC 2013: 6–7). However, it may also appear more roughly recently in the form of ‘country-specific recommendation in policy areas related to PISA’, concerning early school leaving and basic skills, disadvantaged groups and the teaching profession (European Commission/DGEC 2013: 16).

Conclusion

Together with the OECD, we will carry out further analysis of the data in order to help Member States better understand how to improve their
education systems. We need to ensure that future editions of PISA provide us with an opportunity to monitor progress.

(EC Speech 2013)

It is surely significant that PISA-based performance targets or indicators have been set in the EC’s strategic framework ET 2020; and by several countries, as recently declared by representatives from Belgium communities, Denmark, Finland, France, Hungary, Ireland, the Netherlands, Poland, Slovenia, Slovak Republic and Wales-UK, with diverse expressions: rank of the country in international performance, specific national PISA score; increases in the number of high performers or decreases in lower performers; equity goals (see Breakspear 2012).

Operating at the level of ‘principles of action’ and ‘representations’, PISA can be perceived as a promoter and as a resource of a ‘cognitive Europeanisation’ (Hassenteufel 2008: 262) of education: it defines an educational ‘cooperative-competitive’ space, and the ongoing demand for better results and progresses around a common subject (literacy); naturalises mutual surveillance as a specific way of doing policy and politics; fosters the commitment to data-based policies.

As shown in the first section of the chapter, this instrument, characteristic of OECD’s soft regulation modalities, has been receiving different uses and contrasting interpretations at the national level. But the attraction for/from PISA intensifies the practices of mutual surveillance as a way of governing. We can say that comparing with the ‘other’ becomes a practice that means to show the best and the worst vis-à-vis an international standard end, through this, to animate the belief and hope in ‘betterment’ or ‘reform’. Such imagination of ‘equivalents’ and ‘differences’ does not only strengthen the legitimacy of choices and measures to be taken; it also helps to trace old/new identities and even to imagine and set a (new) positioning ‘in the European space’.

These PISA effects have intensified through its recurring mobilisation and reactivation by the EC. As we showed in the second section of the text, these traits are noticeable in the choices and the EC processes of intervention – clearly, on the adoption of literacy as a central category to problematise education in Europe, and in the use of PISA as a source for new European monitoring devices, and can be perceived as contributing to the strengthening of vertical processes deployed in the social and cognitive construction of a European space policy in education. The use of PISA and other OECD instruments are associated with the intensification of collaboration between both organisations – an intensification that, as regards the EC and following the terms of Greek (2014: 267) has been fostered to obtain ‘data to govern’ and obtain a supplementary support to push ‘the commission’s own policy agenda forward, albeit leaving the old subsidiarity rule intact. Yet this strategic resource to PISA is partnering with two other phenomena. On one hand, it arises whether associated with the injunction, in each country, of ‘translation politics’ – the translation of priorities and recommendations of the EC, either to hard forms of regulation, linked to the award (or not) and the management of incentives or financial supports (Nóvoa et al. 2014).

On the other hand, the systematic use of PISA reinforces some of the OECD dicta about governing processes: the primacy of the rational and ‘data-based’ model, opposed to ideological and/or opinion-based coordination; the ‘free acquiescence’ of decision-makers to be involved and support expert-based mutual surveillance as an effective practice; the perception of systematic assessment of literacy – generated by an organisation that performs as an independent expert knowledge provider – as a useful and trustworthy resource for the steering of educational systems.

References


