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# European and international organizations in educational policy: The OECD and policy by numbers

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**Abstract:** *The purpose of this paper is to study the role of European and international organizations in educational policy and the governance of the European education space. It is argued that the influence of transnational and supranational organizations on the discourses and practices of education systems in the European Union contributes to the creation of a “Globally Structured Educational Agenda” whose main purpose is the linking of education systems to the services of the global economy. The educational policy of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) especially plays a crucial role in shaping the European education space by exploiting policy by numbers as a tool and way of governance. Special attention is given to the class of experts / technocrats who as policy actors that shape educational policy transform the European education space. It is also claimed that the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a key policy tool with strong international influence, is considered to be an extremely important hub for the governance of European education by numbers, aiming to improve the quality of education systems. Additionally, it is argued that governing by data establishes the idea of Europe as a Knowledge Economy, an idea expressed in the strategic goal set out in 2000 by the European Council of Lisbon, “making the European Union the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world”. On the other hand, this paper examines skepticism expressed by researchers over the increasing use of numbers for evaluating education systems, for they lead to the establishment of an audit culture and the creation of a global Panopticon in a “measurable” Europe of Knowledge, governed by numbers. Prospects for further research in the field of comparative education are examined, aiming to create different schemes for measuring the quality of education systems, where humanitarian values will be at the forefront.*

**Keywords:** OECD, European education space, policy by numbers

**JEL Classification:** I20, I29

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The current governance of the European education space, in the context of globalization and the neoliberal paradigm, has severely restrained the autonomous implementation of education policy from the states themselves (Lawn & Lingard, 2002). At the same time, international and transnational organizations play a key role as the basic structures of global governance.

The governance shift from the concept of government to governance or “the governance move” (Lingard, 2011) is

manifested by nationwide restructuring of the state, where governing at a distance and other regulatory functions dictated by the New Public Management, privatization of public services and the introduction of market conditions in the public sphere prevail (Sellar & Lingard, 2013). In education, it is linked to the decentralization of the education system, school autonomy, comparative assessment, and is expressed by discourses such as efficiency, quality, accountability and self-regulation (Ozga, 2009).

In the European education space, experts and technocrats from international and supranational organizations are

working together to promote the strategic goal, set out in 2000 by the Lisbon European Council, “to make the European Union the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world” (European Council, 2000: par.1). The aim is not only to create a strong policy or to harmonize education systems based on the diffusion of good practices and benchmarking, but to harmonize and control the design of education policy in the context of globalization and the knowledge economy (Lawn & Lingard, 2002).

However, apart from the establishment of the European space of education, which is partially visible, non-territorial and shaped by the interaction of various political actors (Lawn & Lingard, 2002), one can see another dimension, that of the creation of a “Worldwide Structured Educational Agenda” (Dale, 2000, cited in Moutsios, 2010: 122; Lawn & Lingard, 2002: 299), for many international and transnational institutions through cooperation networks with other organizations “have been promoting worldwide over recent decades a set of education policies which bring education systems into the service of the global economy” (Moutsios, 2010: 122). In this global education space, where governance is exercised at a distance and by soft law, policy by numbers is dominant and expressed by the use of data: numbers, statistics, indicators and benchmarking (Carvalho, 2012; Grek, 2008; Lingard, 2011; Ozga, 2009; Pasiás & Roussakis, 2009), which according to Novoa (2013: 144) are not only “powerful policy tools” but can also be described as “a mode of governance” for the establishment of a governable space of comparison - the European education space, under the gaze of a new global Panopticon (Lingard, Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2013; Pasiás & Roussakis, 2012).

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## 2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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### **Transnational organizations and their role in educational policy**

Changes in the global political and economic system since the end of the Cold War have led to a gradual downgrading of the role of the nation state and the transference of important competences to supranational and transnational levels.

The term “transnational” refers to a set of international networks and supranational organizations operating on variable scales (Pasiás, 2017), producing policy discourses and practices. As nodes of a new empire without colonies, they not only assume national responsibilities, but act as fundamental mediators at the international level too, serving national goals.

As for the state’s control, a new form is introduced, what Du Gay calls “controlled de-control”, a “new architecture of government based on interlocking relationships between disparate sites in and beyond the state” (Ball & Youdell, 2008: 68). Interest is shifting from the administration of state bureaucracies to network management, which indicates the reshaping of educational policy and the relative reduction of the nation - state’s ability to design and implement its own education policy (Christou et al., 2000; Ball & Youdell, 2008). Furthermore, “international organizations are the main promoters of the neo-liberal agenda in the discourses,

policies, and organizational practices of educational institutions” (Moutsios, 2009: 473), focusing on human capital production, productivity and competitiveness.

The European Union (EU), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the International Finance Corporation (IFC), the World Trade Organization (WTO), the Industrialists Round Table, UNESCO, although historically have different approaches to education policy (Ball & Youdell, 2008), are promoting educational reforms in order to submit education “to the pursuits of global economy” (Moutsios, 2009: 467).

Today, the World Bank is the largest external lender and along with the International Monetary Fund has been promoting for decades policies for the development of human capital and economic efficiency in its Member States’ education systems in the context of economic liberalism (Valachis et al., 2008; Moutsios, 2010). In addition to this, it has increased its economic and ideological influence in defining the educational policy agenda of developing countries, either directly or indirectly, by providing policy advisory services by experts (Ball & Youdell, 2008; Moutsios, 2009). According to Moutsios (2009:468), “the WTO’s major aim is not to give loans but to abolish restrictions in global trade and to open selectively domestic markets to capital flows”. By means of the General Agreement on Trade and Services (GATS), education is considered as a service and “therefore subject to market liberalization” (Moutsios, 2010: 122), while “educational systems are opened up to international service providers through the work of GATS” (Ball & Youdell, 2008: 69), which leads to the de-regulation of national educational systems.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) is the globe’s “rich club” (Clifton & Fuentes, 2011: 4; Moutsios, 2009: 468)), as two-thirds of goods and services in the world are produced or carried out in its member states. It currently has 36 Member States, works with other countries and organizations and consists of broad networks of consultants, researchers and policy makers. According to Henry et al. (cited in Moutsios, 2009: 468) it is “a transnational mechanism for surveillance of economic performance and a crucial critical sphere of influence in the global political scene” and consequently in education policy.

Today, the European Union’s education policy is exercised through the Commission departments and agencies, through a variety of actors and networks, but also through co-ordination processes such as the Open Method of Coordination (Moutsios, 2010), which binds its members to the directions of mutual goals, the establishment of indicators and benchmarks, the diffusion of best practices and peer review, seeking not only the convergence towards common objectives but also the improvement of management as policy (Hodson & Maher, 2001, cited in Pasiás, 2017).

### **The OECD and education**

In 1961, the OECD replaced its predecessor, the Organization for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC), founded by the US in 1948 to manage the Marshall Plan, which aimed at rebuilding Europe after the end of the Second World War

(Clifton & Fuentes, 2011; Sellar & Lingard, 2013). The main purpose of the OECD, according to its Convention, was to “promote policies designed to achieve the highest sustainable economic growth and employment”, the expansion of world trade, and the economic development of its Member States as well as non-member countries (OECD, 1960: Article 1). In the 1970s, and after the breakdown of Bretton Woods system and the oil crisis the Organization played a crucial role “in the emergence of a new consensus about the need to shift from Keynesian to monetarist approaches in order to address stagflation” (Sellar & Lingard, 2013: 712), a policy that continued in the 1980s, clearly oriented towards market objectives. The era of the great enlargement was the 1990s, a time that marked the end of the Cold War and led to the accession of eastern European countries to the EU, while the 2000s were marked by new discourses and practices which draw from the Lisbon Strategy and the Bologna Process in the European education space, such as competitiveness, growth, productivity and investing in human capital through education (European Commission, 2006, 7, cited in Moutsios, 2010).

### **The role of technocrats**

The OECD is a “think tank” which has gained a strong political role (Sellar & Lingard, 2013: 712). One could assume that this is the answer or the reaction to globalization, but at the same time should not ignore OECD’s attempts to frame globalization in its own terms. Lingard (2011) mentions that the Organization can be regarded not only as a think tank, but as an expression of the globalized education policy discourses, influencing its Member States, other countries, scientific communities and the networks which constitutes, and in which it acts as a hub.

The OECD “is organized in directorates, departments and centers, committees, working groups and expert groups” (Moutsios, 2010:125). Its bureaucracy, the Secretariat in Paris employs about 2,500 people who support the Agency’s activities and either live there or in centres / branches in other parts of the world, in Berlin, Mexico, Tokyo or Washington (Clifton & Fuentes, 2011). According to Carvalho (2012: 179-180), the role of the General Secretariat is considered to be catalytic, acting as “the monopoly of expertise”, an “independent provider of ideas”, while at the same time coordinates the flows of activities and relationships between a multitude of actors (specialists, bureaucrats, researchers, policy analysts, members of the Organization), ensuring consensus and gaining prestige and credibility due to its know-how. In addition to this, the Secretariat produces an “enormous amount” of documents - studies and publications, which shape the regulatory framework of the co-ordination process. Moutsios reports (2010: 125) that it produces more than 250 publications a year, “national reports for its clients and thematic analyses about most educational issues...and conducts well-known programs of comparison of educational attainment” (PISA and TALIS). Its regulatory and legitimizing power is based on its know-how and its ability to provide solutions to “pre-defined” problems. It is also based on “the imaginary signification of progress as accumulation of knowledge, wealth and power, created in the West and diffused all over the world” (Moutsios, 2010: 136) through the OECD, “the transnational body of a non-

territorial, intangible and fluid economic and political power” (Pasias, 2017: 75).

“The educational policy work of the OECD is based mainly on research and supranational information management – the instruments of which are published country-by country and as comparative analyses, statistics and thematic reviews. The OECD differs from other supranational organizations especially in that its influence over the education policy of the 30 member states is based on the collection, processing, classification, analyzing, storing, supplying and marketing of education policy information. The OECD is unable to take any legally binding decisions or issue obligatory education policy recommendations. However, the OECD has developed an advisory role to policymakers at the highest level and thereby exerted a widespread influence on the social and economic policies of its member states in multiple but indirect ways” (Ball&Youdell, 2008:88).

Scientific communities, expert networks and technocrats have a key role to play in the operation of the Organization. Indeed, the emerging area of European education needs discourses as well as actors. Different policy actors are working incessantly together, in the same physical or virtual spaces, inside and outside national states, in different regions of Europe in a continuous process of translation and political mediation (Lawn & Lingard 2002).

This elite in educational policy can also be described as a “magistracy of influence” (Lawn & Lingard, 2002: 292) in the European educational space that acts at a cross-border level, displays similar predispositions and promotes emerging educational policy in Europe. They are working through data collection regimes, accelerating the flows of ideas and people, and thus contributing to the emergence of a community for a global education policy. They are described as critical actors in the construction of this supranational political sphere, members of a culture built through councils, exchanges, committees, networks and regulations, shaping the imaginary of European education of the future (Lawn & Lingard, 2002).

### **PISA as a policy tool**

PISA is the most influential OECD’s program in the international arena, since it includes countries that are not members of the Organization. It is conducted every three years and evaluates the knowledge and skills of 15-year-old students in specific thematic areas (Language, Mathematics, Natural Sciences, ICT). According to Carvalho (2012), the innovation of the program lies in the fact that it does not examine the content of the curriculum that students have been taught, but their ability “to reflect and to apply their knowledge and experience to real-world issues” (OECD, 2003:9). Grek (2009) argues that PISA’s direct influence in European and non-European countries has become an indirect tool for the governance of the European educational space by numbers.

The program’s main objective is to provide a fixed benchmark through which it can control the development of education systems. Such an objective can only be achieved if it is based on the use of comparative data and information as well as other steering at a distance technologies. Lewis (2017) reports that PISA, more than representing an empirical reality, creates a new one. Accompanied with soft

law and through the dissemination of good practices, a variety of actors (politicians, experts, technocrats, public and private research centres) interact in a variety of activities (meetings, seminars, conferences, workshops) allowing national education systems to imagine and test the education of the future (Carvalho, 2012).

PISA can therefore be regarded as a tool for measuring the quality of education systems, a “knowledge-policy instrument” (Carvalho, 2012:174), which gathers many stakeholders around it and bases its legitimacy (Carvalho, 2012), as well as their commitment and involvement in the production, dissemination, use and consumption of the product as a “brand name” (Grek, 2009: 31).

The Program is not just a “test regime”, Grek argues (2009:28), but an extremely important node in the complex task of governing the European education space. “A political technology... a major governing resource” (Grek, 2009:35), both for national systems and for Europe’s transnational forces and the OECD. Its success lies not only on achieving “convergence on specific political choices or solutions” but on the “merging of policy makers and other public actors with the tool” (Carvalho, 2012: 184).

Lascoumes & Le Gales pointedly stress that a policy tool cannot be politically neutral (cited in Grek, 2009). Therefore, one can argue that as a policy tool, PISA is also a “carrier of guilt” (Carvalho, 2012: 184), as it forces national systems to adapt positions and numbers that determine performance. However, it can also be a carrier of hope and optimism for reform efforts, legalized by a trustworthy expert who offers knowledge, the “global expert” (Lewis, 2017: 292,298).

Many researchers, however, are distrustful about policy by numbers and benchmarking, as well as considering education in terms of economy or learners as human resources for the needs of the global production system (Moutsios, 2009). Finally, there are researchers who doubt whether the OECD can really provide solutions to the problems of non-member countries whose economies differ significantly from those of the West. Clifton & Fuentes (2011: 6) characteristically ask: “The OECD needs emerging markets, but do they need the OECD?”

### **Policy by numbers**

As Ozga (2008) claims, we are “governed by numbers”. It’s all about numbers which “in different aspects of our lives rate, compare and allocate us to categories. Numbers define our worth, measure our effectiveness and, in a myriad of other ways, work to inform or construct what we are today. We are subject to numbers and numbered subjects” (Ball, 2015:299).

The use of numerical data in today's post-Lisbon European education space serves the new hegemonic narrative of the Europe of Knowledge. Already since the 18th century, numbers, statistics, rankings, comparisons and data have been vital to the functioning of the state and the creation of the identity of citizenship and citizen identities (Lingard, 2002; Novoa, 2013; Ozga, 2009). Today, however, policy as numbers is linked to the governance turn and is related to new modes of regulation and new forms of accountability, like the audit culture (Lingard, 2011), or the culture of performativity (Lingard, 2011), as well as to self-regulatory and self-monitoring processes (Ozga, 2009). Indeed, the governance

shift from centralized and vertical hierarchical control systems to decentralized, horizontal network-based governance was possible due to the “availability of data and its rapid flows” (Ozga, 2009: 157).

Standards create and form the social sphere and, in this way, make it governable (Lawn, 2011). “Measuring units, benchmarks and standards are the new essentials of Europeanization. They are the scaffolding of the European space for education. They allow governing by bringing policy areas into being, rendering them transparent, mapping them and producing comparisons of performance...They are not fixed, they are not easily discernible, and they shape the present and determine the future. They are not an interesting or peripheral factor in the system; they are the new system of education. They are essential for governing the new economy of education” (Lawn, 2011: 270). Moreover, the importance that is attached to international comparisons and benchmarking leads nations and subjects to a new global “war for talent” (Sellar & Lingard, 2013: 717) and reflects the new imaginary of education as a global race for economic competition.

Benchmarking, however, is a key tool for governance, because data are needed to control progress. “Governing by data” is not just a process of data collection but a process that rather constructs than describes reality in the field of education. “Comparing must not be seen as a method but as a policy” (Novoa, cited in Grek, 2009: 25). It must be regarded as “a mode of governance...one of the most powerful administration tools not only in Europe but also worldwide” (Novoa, 2013: 144). It becomes a policy that is a key element in the process of building the idea of Europe as a knowledge-based economy (Grek, 2008). The use of performance data, indicators and benchmarks provides ways to build reality by identifying what is important and what is not, and thus defining priorities that will inevitably affect actions and policies (Novoa, 2013: 139).

Lingard et al. (2013: 543) finally contend that “big data” can give shape to our globalized culture, which is characterized by constant change, allowing the creation of new correlations between different things, thus producing “new forms of continuity in liquid times”.

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### **3 LIMITATIONS AND CAPABILITIES**

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As mentioned above, the use of numbers and standards and the culture of accountability that they entail “help constitute the world as a commensurate space of measurement” for national education systems. (Lingard et al., 2013: 541). In that way the globe is made “legible for governing”, under a regime of “Global Panopticism” (Lingard et al., 2013: 552). Criticism does not stop here. Novoa (2013), emphasizes that a form of governance based primarily on production and exposition of performance data and indicators has significant limitations, such as the one-dimensional view of data. He therefore suggests deepening the comparison and enriching it with critical reflection. Numbers can provide significant support for interpreting the world, but they cannot replace our decisions and choices. “Comparison is a way of understanding the world critically, but not a way of governing, as if policies were a “simple”, “neutral” and

“objective” administration of the results presented in an Excel sheet with numbers” (Novoa, 2013:146).

There is a prevalent skepticism about the ability of all these measurements and statistics to fully capture multilevel problems and inconsistencies in educational practice since they ignore the social context in which data is being interpreted. “At their best, these new governance technologies have offered a more coherent and organized framework for the improvement of the quality of education systems across Europe; at their worst, they are simply transforming education cultures and traditions, every aspect of teaching and learning, into tables and graphs, devoid of meaning, political context or any sense of history and place”(Grek, 2008b: 215).

In addition, persistence in the gap talk about school performance strengthens social inequalities in the field of education (Christou & Sigala, 2002, 2003; Lingard, 2011). It is therefore necessary to develop multiple ways of measuring quality, not just based on quantitative measurement of data, and to recognize the need for reflection, along with the rejection of epistemological neutrality.

Especially regarding to the educational practice and the exam orientation of the school, an emphasis is being put on the risk that the achievement of positive results can be translated as a response to manage performativity, which can even lead teachers to manipulate the data (Thomson & Cook, 2014; Lingard, 2011).

Darling-Hammond (2010, cited in Lingard, 2011: 373; Lingard et al., 2013: 544), suggests a more intelligent accountability system that recognizes the wider objectives of education. Even a bottom-up system of accountability that will enable schools to demand from policy makers and systems the ability to “learn the standards”. Similarly, Ozga (2009) asks whether focusing on personalized, tailor-made teaching and learning could provide better tools for measuring progress in schools, or it could lead to the increase of data production and its power, rather than reduce it.

In conclusion, “the new technology of the governance of the European education space through indicators and benchmarks ... has to be examined as a deeply penetrating consciousness-moulding and thus the serious business of constructing new categories of (educational) thought and action - the project of re-inventing a new European identity of competitive advantage and responsible individualism” (Grek, 2008: 215).

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#### 4 CONCLUSION

From the above discussion, it has become clear that “the European educational landscape is increasingly colonized by specific “regimes of truth” and “systems of knowledge”, which introduce, reproduce and legitimize technocratic / market driven rationales and establish a modern European Panopticon of a “measurable” Europe of knowledge, governed by numbers and based on technologies of theasis/gaze, performativity, surveillance and control” (Pasiás & Roussakis, 2009: 136).

Therefore, much of the criticism also concerns the role and responsibility of the scientific community in the creation, application and legitimization of the above technologies.

Research in comparative education should not repeat what we already know, but “open up new ways of thinking and new understandings” (Novoa, 2013: 146), without limiting its imagination (Lingard, 2011), but above all it has to contribute to a new social imaginary beyond the dominance of neo-liberalism, where numbers have almost replaced values (Lingard, 2011). For we may be governed by numbers, data, indicators, benchmarks and measurements, but do we still remember “what really counts?” (Lingard et al., 2013: 553)

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