**Spreading Knowledge and Evidence.**

**The OECD as a Knowledge Broker and Norm Entrepreneur in International Education Policy**

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**Dr. Dennis Niemann**
University of Bremen
Institute for Intercultural an International Studies (InIIS)
Mary-Somerville-Strasse 7
D - 28359 Bremen, Germany

Phone: + 49 421 218-67473
E-mail:dniemann@uni-bremen.de

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**Prof. Dr. Kerstin Martens**
University of Bremen
Institute for Intercultural an International Studies (InIIS)
Mary-Somerville-Strasse 7
D - 28359 Bremen, Germany

Phone: + 49 421 218-67498
E-mail: martensk@uni-bremen.de
Dennis Niemann and Kerstin Martens

Spreading Knowledge and Evidence. The OECD as a Knowledge Broker and Norm Entrepreneur in International Education Policy

Abstract
As the policy field of education has become increasingly internationalized over the last decade, international organizations, like the OECD, play an ever more decisive role in the diffusion of knowledge, monitoring, and research in education policy. Although the OECD lacks any binding or coercive governance instruments in relation to states, and neither can it provide material incentives for compliance, it has successively expanded its influence regarding international education policies. While it is well understood that IOs matter in contemporary international relations, the way in which they actually impact the governance of nation states remains unclear. From a perspective of social constructivism, we argue that the transmission of ideas and information generated through ratings and rankings can be viewed as a crucial governance tool for IO influence. Our paper seeks to analyze how the OECD uses educational large scale assessments to promote the economically-based idea of human capital and related learning techniques in education policy - influencing national education systems through its expertise. Furthermore, we argue that the OECD and its distinctive framing of education as governance approach serves as a role model for other IOs in the field of education and beyond.

Key words: international organizations, education policy, soft governance, social constructivism, OECD

Introduction
In contrast to trade, security, or environmental policy, no vital need for international cooperation is evident concerning the development of an overall better policy outcome in education – particularly with respect to secondary education.¹ There is no underlying dilemma calling for multilateral coordination as there are in other fields and, hence, states usually do not need to cooperate with one another on the subject of education because of the lack of interdependencies (Porter and Webb 2008: 43). Education simply exhibits no zero-sum logic:

¹ International cooperation in Higher Education takes place, though, to fostering mobility of labor forces. The Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area are two examples of this development.
The increase of the education outcome of one state is not associated with the simultaneous loss of education outcome of another. Furthermore, education is considered as a core responsibility of the state to generate social coherence, economic independence, and national identity (Nagel et al. 2010: 15). As a prerogative of the state, education policy serves as a means to educate its people in civic rights and duties, enable them to succeed in the labor market, and to teach national history and languages. Accordingly, education policy seems to be traditionally dealt with exclusively on the national level.

Nevertheless, in the wake of ongoing globalization processes and worldwide competition, education policy is becoming increasingly internationalized (Deacon 2007; Mundy 2007). In a globalized world, education is considered to play an important role in contributing to the further economic, scientific, and social development of states. National education systems have to respond to new challenges posed by the emergent global knowledge economy (Robertson 2005). Thus, even in areas that are a classically the prerogative of national policy-making and do not feature a specific dilemma situation, diverse international institutions progressively play a more central role (Stone 2009). Since the early 1990s we can observe a steady increase in international exchange and in cooperation, particularly through IO activities in international education policy (Martens et al. 2007). Also, from the 1990s onwards, the numbers of countries participating in international large scale comparative assessments have been on the rise. It seems fair to say that education policy successively developed into an object of increasing international coordination. One characteristic of this new constellation is the emergence of new IO actors in the international arena of education politics.

Expanding education into the international arena can analytically be grasped as a complementary process of two developments. On the one hand international institutions, like IOs, are directly mandated by states to administer and facilitate multilateral cooperation in the field of education. Established by states, IOs are empowered to enable progress that states cannot realize on their own. IOs carry out these tasks by establishing rules, procedures, or standards and by monitoring and reporting mechanisms. For instance, the multilateral European Bologna Process provides a forum for its member states to coordinate and align their higher education systems (Dobbins and Knill 2014; Vögtle 2014). Historically, state actors themselves have been the main driving force behind the formation of international education initiatives (Fulge et al. 2016). Recently, they have also delegated some of their regulatory authority to IOs. Hence, delegation entails the transfer of power from the state level to IOs. Sometimes agents, in this case IOs, exceed their predefined mission and produce

2 http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001555/155507e.pdf
unintended consequences, lock-in effects, or path dependencies for their principals. However, other IOs autonomously expanded their portfolio in education policy and successively became important players in the field without having a predefined mandate for doing so (see contributions in Martens et al 2007). Even IOs that were not originally concerned with education as their core topic became central. Among these IOs, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank are some prominent examples of IOs not originally concerned with education but became active in that field over the years. By doing so they not only shaped the international field of education sustainably but also reinforced their position as influential and autonomous actors vis-à-vis their member states. In our study, we focus on the OECD as a prime example of an IO that successively expanded its expertise and influence in education policy (Martens and Jakobi 2010; Rubenson 2008; Henry et al. 2001). It can be regarded as an example of a *de jure* powerless IO, but one which gained regulatory influence.

In our paper, we argue that the OECD influenced national education policies by means of soft governance and, at the same time, also influenced other IOs in terms of serving as a role model regarding the design of their governance strategies in education by referring to the OECD’s governance by numbers technique. In other words, the OECD became a central node in the network of international education politics and we can speak of an OECD-fication of international education policy. Methodologically, our study relies on the qualitative method of comparative historical analysis (Rueschemeyer 2003; Mahoney 2004). We apply process tracing, document analysis, and expert interviews with German and U.S. decision makers and stakeholders in secondary education and representatives from the OECD to analyze the role and effects of the OECD’s education policy.

**A theoretical account on the power of ideas and normative governance**

In any case, (intended or unintended) consequences of the internationalization of education policy arise for states: National education policy-makers and other stakeholders cannot ignore but have to deal with initiatives from the international level. States are faced with international initiatives in education and these international initiatives challenge domestic policies, politics, and traditions/ideas. Central to this is the role of IOs and their ability to gain autonomy and authority. Often equipped to set agendas, foster implementation, and make autonomous decisions in the face of state sovereignty, IOs are more than the sum of their member states’ interests (Koremenos et al. 2001). Barnett and Finnemore (2004, 2005) particularly enriched the understanding of IOs as powerful actors possessing “a sphere of
autonomy and a resource they can use to shape the behavior of others in both direct and indirect ways” (Barnett and Finnemore 2005: 162). IOs are able to make decisions which may counter the wishes and virtues of their members and influence national governments “to act differently than they would otherwise” (Archer 2001: 80).

While it is well understood that international institutions matter, the way in which they actually impact states’ behavior remains largely under-researched. IOs’ influence on national policy-making remains subject to a theoretical debate. Especially in an asymmetrical top-down setting with the absence of enforceability, it is pivotal to provide an explanation how the “top” exerts influence on the “down”. However, top-down does not necessarily refer to a formal hierarchical setting in terms of power to command and coerce. Asymmetries can also be constituted differently. For instance, if one party possesses information which other parties do not, an asymmetrical relationship is established. In the absence of command and control, IOs could make use of producing information and knowledge to generate influence in matters of soft governance (Conzelmann 2008: 44). In consequence, most IOs are generally analyzed from a theoretical perspective of soft governance (with the prominent exception of the supranational European Union) and their governance approach cannot be equated with traditional hierarchical steering.

IO soft governance implies that - although IOs are set up by states and consist mainly of state delegates - they are able to develop their own positions, ideas, or dynamics because of intra-organizational networks and interactions that cannot be fully controlled by their principals. Despite the provision of a clear mandate on how to act, IOs can go beyond their previously defined roles and develop new aims and administrative activities that exceed their initial purpose and scope. Barnett and Finnemore (2004) have demonstrated such “pathologies” of how IO preferences, interests, and ideas can diverge from those of the founding states, as a process of emancipation from – and at times even acting against the interest of – the founders. IOs sometimes follow their own agenda, thereby exerting influence back onto their member states, given the potential for an agency slack (Koenig-Archipugi 2006). This is accomplished because IOs – or more specifically, their bodies (e.g. secretariats, departments, and working groups) – embrace a topic and develop their own ways of dealing with issues. Instead of simply carrying out what their member states urged them to do, IOs could follow their own interests and agendas, thereby exerting influence back onto their member states and beyond (Barnett and Finnemore 2004).

In addition, an IO needs to be accepted as an authority (in the given policy field) in order to be heard. Authority can be granted by the state principals (e.g. through conventions,
constitutions, legal acts, etc.) or acquired through action, expertise, and routines, making the IO a well-acknowledged player in a policy field. Furthermore, authority of an actor lacking coercive powers is strongly linked to the aspect of legitimacy. An indicator for perceiving an IO as legitimate is the degree of its reputation. In this regard, an IO is appraised as rational and impartial; IOs with a good reputation are accepted as legitimate sources of information and advice because they feature apolitical and technocratic expertise (Barnett 2002: 113). The impact of IO outputs “is inseparably bound up with judgments about the reputation of that institution” (Sharman 2007: 30). Perceived legitimacy of IOs often generates a “compliance pull” (Franck 1990) that makes others follow a recommendation mainly because the IO is perceived as a legitimate source.

How, then, do IOs “govern”? In general, “governance […] encompasses the activities of governments, but it also includes the many other channels through which ‘commands’ flow” (Rosenau 2005: 46). Thereby, a command can be understood as any token that implies a behavioral adaptation in the sense that something should be done (or omitted). This understanding of governance presents IOs (and other inter- and transnational actors) as having the ability to create, diffuse and implement rules, norms and standards through means of soft governance rather than through binding legislation understood as hard law (Abbott and Snidal 2000). Hence, the perspective of governance entails a shift form states to a multiplicity of regulatory actors, from hard to also soft law, from formal to informal rules (Mingst 1999: 93). Social constructivism offers explanatory value in assessing IO governance capabilities by highlighting the ability of IOs to promote the normative value of a certain norm as legitimate and worthy of acceptance. IOs do not revert to a set of pre-defined prescriptions to influence others’ behavior, but convince the addressees to do (or omit) something by sound arguments rather than sticks or carrots. This “normative power” of IOs which relies on their moral authority is depicted as ideational rather than material in influencing states and others to adhere to IO outputs (Manners 2009).³ Normative power is an ideational non-material justification on the levels of principles, actions, and impacts (Manners 2002, 2009). In this sense IOs disseminate certain views/norms/values and constrain behavior that is not in accordance with a promoted view/norm/value by discursive means (Joachim et al. 2008: 11) by reverting to mechanisms such as shaming or prestige rather than coercion or material incentives (Manners 2009). Hence, normative governance can also delegitimize a certain

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³ Originally “normative power” as coined by Manners (2002) refers exclusively to the European Union (see: Forsberg 2011) but normative power can be expanded to other IOs as well.
behavior by establishing the understanding that it runs counter to an aspired higher goal. In this case, behavior is stigmatized as socially unacceptable or undesirable.

Thus, both the social creation of common knowledge as a standard in a certain policy field and the role of IOs in shaping international discourse are essential for normative governance (Abbott and Snidal 1998: 5). Since IOs utilizing soft normative governance rely on their function as advisors and opinion leaders, one key element is the role and dissemination of ideas.4 The central argument here is that the proliferation of ideas and ideational change in turn promote policy change. Ideas serve as a cognitive framework for interpreting an issue, identifying something as a problem, and rendering suitable solution strategies. Consequently, how agents act in the world is strongly determined by how they perceive their environment. Furthermore, the perceptions of the actors’ environment are neither stable nor fixed. Perception, in the first instance, is a matter of interpretation. How to think about something is strongly influenced by ideas that serve as “cognitive filters through which actors come to […] conceive of their own interests” (Hay 2011: 69). First, ideas shape the definition of an issue as a problem. In this regard, the reinterpretation of a situation (a policy) in the light of a new idea shows that something is wrong. Second, by identifying something as problematic, ideas can indicate goals at the same time – i.e. a more desirable policy. Third, suitable means for accomplishing the (new) goal are communicated through ideas. Ideas are not just tools in the hand of strategic actors (Lieberman 2002: 699), they need agents to be disseminated. IOs act as these disseminators (or broadcasters) of ideas (Djelic and Sahlin-Andersson 2006: 17) and aim to “nurture people’s identities, helping them to construct their fundamental values, which, in turn shapes their beliefs and interests” (Béland and Cox 2011: 9). IOs (and other institutions) help to define what (domestic) stakeholders want and provide them with the justification for why they want something in particular. An idea is picked up and further developed within the IO. As a result, an IO (and its staff) has a set of ideas that guides its actions and determines how the IO interprets policy goals and national policy frameworks, policy instruments, and policy contents. In this regard, a central contribution of IOs is to activate and promote ideas.

Two interlinked modes in exerting normative power could be derived from the work of Mahon and McBride (2009): the inquisitive and the meditative mode. The inquisitive mode involves the gathering of information regarding a specific issue. In this context, the ability to define something as a problem becomes pivotal. This means IOs first create a common shared

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4 We follow Béland and Cox’s definition in conceiving ideas as causal beliefs that “provide guides for action [and help] to think about ways to address problems [and] posit causal relations that guide people’s decisions and preferences” (Béland and Cox 2011: 4).
knowledge by providing information which was otherwise not accessible. The collected data is then interpreted against the background of views/ideas within the IO. Pure information is transformed into substantial knowledge (Barnett and Finnemore 2004) as basis for further (soft) actions. It is deemed essential to back arguments with empirical evidence. No one will be convinced by any argument unless it is not proved to be conclusive and sound.

In addition, the meditative mode addresses direct contributions to the political discourse. IOs make recommendations to their members (and beyond) on the basis of publicized information and findings about best practices in a certain policy field, and consequently lobby for them (Martens and Jakobi 2010). This lobbying can take different forms. Recommendations can illustrate directly how to act in a policy field. More indirectly, recommendations can also emphasize the behavior of a peer actor in order to serve as a blueprint.

Overall, normative governance by IOs is characterized by discursively constraining the frame of appropriate behavior. The main point is that this governance technique aims at increasing or decreasing the legitimacy of a certain behavior and therefore tries to influence a policy outcome indirectly. IOs are able to exert influence over their member states because they possess the authority to orient action and create social reality (Barnett and Finnemore 2004) and, with the tool of “naming and shaming”, IOs can generate (immaterial) cost for behavior that is defined as not desired (Hafner-Burton 2008; Joachim et al. 2008). IOs aim to frame a common understanding of the issue at stake and define goals for policy-making by increasing or decreasing the legitimacy of a certain norm, policy, or behavior.

**OECD and PISA: Empirical Observations**

How did the OECD mature into a reference point in (secondary) education policy and was it able to influence national and global education policy? In the following part we trace empirically how the OECD has become a knowledge broker and norm entrepreneur in education policy over the last two decades.

Since the mid-1990s, the OECD has emphasized the production of human capital as a counteraction to the emerging effects of globalization (Henry et al. 2001: 45). Its thorough educational means were seen as a precondition to succeed on the global market. From the human capital perspective, education is an investment for which public authorities are responsible (Resnik 2006). This perspective is largely borrowed from the Anglo-American ideological education framework, which focuses much more on the dimension of economic usability of education than other traditions. Education is defined as a driving force for growth and the OECD is committed to improving the quality, equity, efficiency, and effectiveness of
their member countries’ education systems (OECD 2010/2011). The OECD’s understanding of education outcomes is closely coupled to the utility of generated knowledge. The value of knowledge depends on its utility for other areas (e.g. applied research, technological progress) (Mangez and Hilgers 2012). The emphasis on generating human capital became the cornerstone of the OECD’s education framework, from which it proactively pushed strategies and recommendations for intensifying the competitiveness of its member states through education.

The primary turning point in the OECD’s education activities is characterized by a shift from ‘discursive contributions to education policy’ (Martens and Jakobi 2010: 15) to the gathering of empirical comparative data. It was this “comparative turn” which the OECD took gradually starting in the early 1990’s and boosting it to become an important player in education policy: “whereas in the past it has focused on each state individually acknowledging differences and idiosyncrasies, it now decisively compares states with each other and against standardized criteria. Such direct comparisons put states under greater pressure to reform their systems because the OECD’s statistics on education performances have become more easily accessible and interpretable to politicians, the media, and the wider public” (Martens 2007: 40).

Most importantly, the OECD advanced its status as an influential education IO by designing and managing/conducting PISA. Although PISA could be regarded as a database of education data only, it is more than that: it has become a political instrument for governments to reform their education systems and for the OECD as an actor. While the OECD in the beginning of PISA still kept a rather neutral position as a mere producer of education data, it increasingly applied PISA as a tool to govern the international discourse on education (Bloem 2016). From the year 2000 onward, PISA has been conducted triennially; the results are published a year after. By 2015, over 70 states all around the globe had participated in the study. While PISA is continuously expanding, there are still some states that are not blessed by being scrutinized by the OECD’s education flagship. Non-participation is not to be equated with irrelevance, however. PISA is recognized almost everywhere. Even tiny states, like Grenada or Vanuatu, are influenced by PISA where it comes to improving their own education systems or in designing similar national evaluation mechanisms. For instance, in Vanuatu the PISA results were used to justify reforms, provoke policy debates, and as a source of data. In Grenada, the model of PISA was regarded as helpful in improving the national education system in the areas of curriculum, the organization of education governance, and in shaping

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5 https://www.beltz.de/fachmedien/erziehungs_und_sozialwissenschaften/buecher/produkt_produktdetails/29946-die_pisa_strategie_der_oecd.html
6 In the 2006 study, PISA covered nearly 90% of the world economy (OECD 2007).
the qualification and preparation of teachers. Thus, the study reaches well beyond the core group of OECD member states and also evaluates the education performance of emerging economies and developing states. PISA is an internationally applied framework for education performance and was depicted as the “harbinger of changes in both the political frameworks and the educational objectives” (Meyer and Benavot 2013: 10). Therefore, domestic education systems were evaluated in the global perspective. The OECD thus not only evaluates voluntarily participating countries, but one could argue that the IO is extending its range of influence gradually by expanding the participatory base: in 2015, for example, the IO also started PISA for Development for middle- and low-income countries; additionally, it has run the *PISA for Schools* program for a few years now so that individual schools can be measured against other unities in the database, even countries. Sellar and Lingard (2013) argue that the expansion of the OECD activities in education includes widening the scope of the assessment by measuring a broader set of competencies, increasing the scale of the assessment by covering more countries, and enhancing the explanatory power of the assessment for policymaker and educators.

In general, the international acceptance of testing regimes is associated with key ideological forces that emphasize the globalization of national and international cultural, economic and political structures (Kamens and McNeely 2010). Hence, PISA reflects the demand of states to make education outcomes internationally comparable. At the same time, the comparative PISA study contributes to a global concept of “good education.” National education systems are evaluated against a predefined set of benchmarks concerning which factors produce the best performance outcomes.

Why does PISA seem so attractive? PISA is accessible and useful both for experts and a wider public audience (Martens and Niemann 2013). Experts can extract detailed quantitative information from the encompassing assessment data, establish mathematical correlations between diverse items, and produce policy recommendations on the basis of PISA data. At the same time, the broader public can learn how national education systems perform, are able to compare them in a general sense based on the provided league tables, and find out why some are better than others by reading further publications provided by the OECD. Hence, the focus has been on comparability, and data is processed in order to be interpreted in terms of ‘the development of common prisms’ (Woodward 2009: 66). Since PISA has been conducted

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7 Data has been taken from the survey “The Appeal of Numbers? An Interdisciplinary Approach to International Assessments in Education”, conducted in October/November 2015, financed by Welfare Societies, University of Bremen.
regularly for more than 15 years now, these rankings are also compared over time to demonstrate if and to what extent a country has improved. By focusing on performance outcomes of education systems in PISA, the market economy bias of the OECD is also visible in the way in which information is provided (Kallo 2006). Although the OECD is acknowledged as an expert in providing assessment studies, the perspective through which the IO evaluates education performances is hardly characterized by neutrality. As Bloem has convincingly shown, the IO itself as an actor has become increasingly politically active with PISA, pushing its favored human capital approach for education (Bloem 2016).

**OECD’s normative governance**

Although the OECD does not have any legal means or fiscal capacities to force states to follow its policy recommendation (Woodward 2009; Martens and Jakobi 2010), states nonetheless follow OECD recommendations – or at least feel the need to justify decisions against these recommendations. Particularly, the PISA project and its approach of evaluating national education systems and comparing them to each other in rankings is a source for policy recommendations.

However, the intuitive expectation that a strong correlation between domestic reforms and performance in the international education test exists does not hold true empirically. As we have shown in some of our previous work, countries that perform similarly in PISA are not inevitably interchangeable with respect to their reform reactions to PISA (Martens and Niemann 2013). It has been outlined that negative press coverage on countries’ performance in PISA would also reflect the negative public opinion about national education policy (Dixon et al. 2013). Taking domestic media reception as an indicator for the saliency of an issue in national politics, we observed that the plain performance of a country only has some minor influence on the extent of national responses to international education studies:

> “In regard to particularly poor results, the likelihood of it becoming a substantial issue of public discourse increased in countries such as Germany, Spain, Austria and Mexico. However, other countries at the lower end of the PISA league, like the US, Poland and Portugal, did not experience a public outcry reflected in the media coverage. As an overall trend, the worse the rank, the more differentiated the reactions are” (Martens and Niemann 2013: 320).

Since other mechanisms must be accountable for explaining the impact of PISA, it seems worth taking a closer look at the soft governance activities of the OECD. The OECD made use of naming and shaming by evaluating national education systems, comparing them to
other states and deriving indirect implications from inferior educational performances. PISA possesses considerable influence on education as a field of policy through use of the media by ascribing the status of ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ to participating countries (Porter and Webb, 2008: 47; Grek 2009). Obviously, no state, and in particular no industrialized OECD member state, wants to be labelled as an underperformer when measured by international education standards that define how well a state is prepared for future economic challenges. By making these publicly visible, the OECD is potentially able to stimulate national discourse in low-performing countries on the necessity of reforms (Martens and Niemann 2013) or to reinforce the proven-as-successful policy paths in high performing countries.

At the same time OECD’s PISA showed which education policies seemed to produce better performance outcomes (in PISA). And the IO also showed what does not work (Bieber et al. 2014). In highlighting best practices, PISA/OECD also urges national policy makers to look across borders in order to identify international education policies worth implementing. By identifying models of “what works” as well as providing periodical reviews and comparative datasets, PISA results pressure national policy-makers (and other stakeholders in the education administration and civil society) to improve national education policies to reflect the identified best practice models in order to be competitive in globalized knowledge economy (Niemann et al. 2017, forthcoming). According to knowledge derived from the PISA results, the OECD made references to peer countries and best practices which should be converted to domestic education systems to boost academic performance. By doing so, the IO is able to set global agendas and diffuse policies in a variety of fields among OECD members and non-members alike (Ougaard 2010).

Basically, with PISA benchmarking, the OECD generates normative pressure for lagging countries to implement educational policies consistent with better-performing countries and best practices (Sellar Lingard 2013). The OECD makes resources and expertise available for other actors, introduces networks of experts, provides forums for coordination and advice, and acts as a surveillance and evaluation organization regarding the adoption of commitments, agreements, or the like. For instance, reporting procedures of the OECD can “provide ammunition crucial for ‘naming and shaming’ techniques or for lobby campaigns by domestic coalitions” (Conzelmann 2008: 36). PISA was not (merely) an activity of the OECD to conduct research on education and to provide general information, but was also designed and conceived as an instrument to support decision-making (Mangez and Hilgers 2012: 196). Hence, the OECD does not stop at knowledge fabrication. Furthermore, the IO seeks to disseminate this knowledge in terms of policy advice.
The influential power of PISA therefore lies in its ‘better arguments’ (Marcussen 2004). Since the OECD is highly regarded as a credible and legitimate source, many countries use the IO’s direct and indirect recommendations as a guide for their own policy objectives. The OECD governs through non-binding persuasion with empirically driven arguments. Through the generation and interpretation of PISA data, the OECD also highlights specific features of particular education systems that are appropriate for improving human capital production. For instance, school autonomy in combination with increased accountability measures are seen as integral to enhance effectiveness in secondary education.

**Case Studies on Influence of OECD: Germany and beyond**

The last decade witnessed comprehensive education reforms in several countries. It goes uncontested that international institutions have impact, but it remains an open question on how they manage to exert influence. By using standardized tests as a means of measuring educational outcomes, large scale assessments, like PISA, allow for the quantification as well as comparison of education systems across countries, regions, and even individual schools. These comparisons are used to identify strengths and weaknesses of education systems, which can prompt and shape educational reform processes. This trend has been observed in many countries, wherein school reforms were initiated following the publication of international assessment results (Lingard and Grek 2007; Martens et al. 2010).

While some states reformed their education systems with clear reference to PISA, others did not. In fact, about 50% of all PISA participating countries initiated reforms in direct response to PISA (Breakspear 2012). States voluntarily follow the indirect recommendations of the OECD.

Take Germany as an example: It has been argued that the reforms in the German education system would not have occurred to a great extent without OECD’s PISA study (Münch 2009). While it was contested that PISA (or the OECD) invented any new reform steps for the German education system, it is largely accepted that PISA was a catalyst for introducing overdue reforms. Accordingly, PISA in Germany became the object of intensified research (Tillmann et al. 2008; Niemann 2016). While the awareness of potential German education deficits rose in the mid-1990s, and further participation in international comparative assessments were agreed upon, PISA actually triggered a landslide of education reforms in Germany.
The public recognition for PISA in Germany was exceptional. When compared to other countries, the German media debate on PISA was far above average in the first PISA cycle (2001-2004) (Martens and Niemann 2013), and PISA results were not as intensively covered by media attention in almost any other country. The public debate on PISA was also not a singular event in Germany but a sustained phenomenon with recurring intensity. The topic of education performance remained on the public agenda with varying intensity throughout the period from 2001 to 2015. Each time a new round of PISA was published, the media coverage again increased for a short period of time, albeit with decreasing intensity.

While the country was below average in PISA 2000, it constantly improved and was among the group of states that performed above average in PISA 2012 (Prenzel et al. 2013). Accordingly, the public discourse concerned with PISA became less intense. Thus, improving performance of German students in PISA was accompanied by a “normalization” of the public discourse. Overall, the diagnosis by PISA was not a one-shot observation but an identification of a systemic problem embodied in the German education system which was designed in a way to strengthen the already privileged students while neglecting disadvantaged students. This leads to massive equity issues (Allmendinger and Leibfried 2003) and since then the German policy discourse on education reforms has regularly addressed how socio-economic factors predetermine education performances (Niemann et al. 2017).

Also the political reactions to PISA were exceptional in Germany. Almost instantly after the publication of the first PISA results in December 2001, comprehensive education reforms were introduced in Germany. In general, the enacted reforms through PISA can be outlined by two streams. First, measures have been taken to improve the educational outcome. Immediately after the publication of the first PISA results in December 2001, a plan was presented by the German government (Federal and Länder) that addressed the main deficits and listed seven main areas where changes were required. The focus was on early education in order to create a better basis for academic performances and on the advancement of socio-economically disadvantaged students (e.g., students with an immigrant background).

Second, and directly derived from the example of PISA, a stronger focus on the outputs of the education system and corresponding evidence-based policymaking took place. The traditional German input-orientation was identified as a blind spot that prevented the implementation of appropriate reactions to problems. In response, a shift to output-oriented governance was introduced. Germany established a culture of performance evaluation, which was built on empirical evidence to guide policy decisions. Additionally, school autonomy experienced
increased importance. International comparisons were not only the focal point of interest. Assessments on the performance of the German Länder were also increasingly subject to evaluation. The newly emphasized empirical comparative research can be identified on two levels. On the one hand, German policymakers began to look beyond national borders and evaluated other education systems against the background of performance and aspects worth copying (BMBF 2003). On the other, comparative research within Germany was also massively promoted. Several studies and assessments were launched to review performances. The new development was also accompanied by an increased implementation of comparative tests and evaluations in schools.

Taking a look at the actual impact of PISA beyond Germany, we can identify a plethora of different reactions. Like Germany, Denmark was shocked by its PISA results, particularly since Denmark’s Scandinavian neighbours performed much better in the first round. Substantial changes towards increased national assessment procedures and support for disadvantaged students, however, have only been implemented after an in-depth international review (Egelund 2008). Despite this debate starting after the 2000 PISA results were published, real policy changes were only taken after 2003. After the surprising results spurred broad public debate, numerous studies analyzing these results were conducted, bringing policy recommendations to the fore around 2003 (Egelund 2008: 250). Although Switzerland placed in the upper tier of the PISA league table in all testing rounds, about 20 percent of its students placed within the two lowest competence levels in reading literacy. Consequently, the results enforced already existing attempts of innovation, which accelerated the famous reform project, “HarmoS” that finally harmonized the 26 different cantonal school systems. Swiss policy-makers adopted a majority of PISA-based OECD recommendations for secondary education, such as social equity, school autonomy, and quality assurance, within only a few years (Bieber, 2016; Bieber et al., 2015). With regard to PISA’s impact on Japan, Takayama (2008; 2010) shows that PISA greatly influenced Japan’s education discourse and policy reforms. A perceived crisis in education policy erupted in the late 1990s in Japan, as publications showed great shortcomings in the education system. In this climate, the results from the PISA 2000 round fell on fertile ground (Takayama 2008). The Japanese government utilized the PISA results as an external source of legitimacy for highly sensitive policies and reforms (Takayama 2008: 401). Israel also has been affected by PISA. After the publication of the 2000 PISA results in 2003, the Ministry of Education used the momentum to create a task force on educational reforms. Feniger et al. (2012) argue that the ministry had already
been working on reforms before PISA brought in the first internationally comparative rankings on the Israeli education system. The newly formed committee emphasized reforms that clearly carried the thumbprint of PISA recommendations in terms of “managerialism and a globalistic approach”, including the goal to improve the country’s performance in international rankings (Feniger et al. 2012: 329).

Reverse reactions appeared in the U.S., where a relatively low performance position in the league tables compared to other advanced economies did not necessarily lead to public or political responses (Martens and Niemann 2013). Only with the PISA 2009 study did PISA become central to education discourse, when the Chinese demonstrated extraordinarily good results. These were viewed essentially as a new Sputnik shock. Similarly, the Chinese lead in PISA was interpreted as an omen for China’s overtaking the U.S. in its economic output. In England, the picture is more diverse. The education system had already been substantially reformed in the 1980s and standardized testing programs were already commonplace. England performed well in the first round of PISA in 2000 but dropped in later rounds. Although results did not improve significantly, reactions to PISA were moderate, and the British government employed a ‘pick-and-choose’-strategy to adopting OECD recommendations (Knodel and Walkenhorst 2010).

Apart from case studies of single countries, systematic comparisons of policy changes in a larger number of countries are scarce. By looking at different aspects of accountability and assessment practices, Teltemann and Klieme (2016) showed that the use of standardized assessments increased throughout OECD countries between PISA 2000 and 2009. Likewise, the use of assessment for purposes of comparison between schools increased in many OECD countries. Other policies, such as school inspections and accountability in the form of tracked achievement data, show more mixed patterns of change between different rounds of PISA. Taken together, the OECD framed how education should be organized and disseminated, taking examples from other states for reform. Thereby, the OECD empowered national stakeholders and interest groups to prompt domestic education reforms (Woodward 2009) by providing sound empirical arguments for their views while others’ positions were eclipsed. As noted in Germany and in Switzerland, the PISA findings were used to introduce assessment procedures and measures of accountability. In particular, employers’ organizations gained leverage in this regard by referring to PISA data while other groups against these measures, such as teachers’ unions, lost discursive power (Niemann 2014). They were no longer able to block these reform streams because of the indirect, yet influential power of PISA. Hence, the OECD was indirectly able to change the power constellations in national education politics.
since the international organization strengthened those actors whose preferences and beliefs were identical to the OECD’s program (Armingeon 2004). Actors who hold different positions in education that were not supported by the empirical evidence presented by PISA lost power in terms of argumentative leverage.

OECD influencing other IOs – Research Outlook

In the previous section, we have argued that the OECD was able to shape domestic education policies by a soft governance strategy of legitimizing and de-legitimizing national education systems and practices. This strategy is based on comparative empirical data on the performance of domestic education systems. The examples of Germany and other countries illustrated that the OECD diffused its ideas regarding education policy to the national level. At the same time, the OECD, first and foremost by the means of its PISA initiative, also defined a standard for assessing education performance through comparative large scale assessments. PISA became the most prominent and most comprehensive international education assessment to date.

The field of international education policy is today populated by several IOs (and other international non-governmental institutions) constituting a dense net of actors competing for influence. Even more, IOs that were originally not concerned with education became increasingly involved/active in this policy field over the course of the last few decades. Of all more-or-less internationally operating IOs, around 20 work intensely in the field of education. More scholarly work is needed on how these IOs interact with and influence both each other and states. In combination with our research result that the OECD was powerful in influencing states to reform their education system, the subsequent research question arises whether the OECD was and is also able to influence other IOs. Since the OECD is often considered as one of the most influential IOs in international secondary education, it seems plausible to assume that other IOs are eager to copy imitate the OECD’s approach and foster their own significance. Additionally, we are interested in if the OECD actively seeks to influence other IOs. In sum, our next step is to identify if and also how other education IOs are influenced by the OECD.

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8 The Yearbook of International Organisations counts currently 277 IOs while the Correlates of War dataset, counting also inactive IOs, consists of a database of around 495 IOs.
References


