OECD as a site of coproduction: European education governance and the new politics of 'policy mobilization'

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Located in the field of the transnational governance of education, the article examines international comparative testing through a sociological analysis of the knowledge and actors that have become central to it. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has become a dominant policy actor in the governance of European education; this was the result of its deliberate and systematic mobilization by the European Commission (EC), which found in the OECD not only a great resource of data to govern (which it did not have before) but also a player who would be pushing the Commission's own policy agenda forward, albeit leaving the old subsidiarity rule intact. The article discusses the role of experts in this emergent European policy field through an examination of 'policy mobilization'; using the concepts of boundary work and 'boundary organization', the article shows how the OECD has transformed into a 'site of coproduction' of both knowledge and social order (St Clair, A.L., 2006. Global poverty: the co-production of knowledge and politics. *Global social policy*, 6 (1), 57–77).

Keywords: education; experts; OECD; boundary

Introduction

The story of education governance in Europe, much like most accounts narrating this old continent, is one of travel and prejudice. On the one hand, travel is integral to Europe, since most of what we identify with a degree of 'Europeanness' has always connected people and ideas through movement and mobility; education, either in its institutionalized or in its less formal guises, has always been central to the 'traveling' of cultures, practices and peoples around Europe. Paradoxically however, the national education 'system' has always been relatively closed off; seen as a bounded entity in itself, it became one of the last fortresses of the nation-state against the predicament of 'global' dictates and shifts. Despite borrowings and 'policy lessons'– which have largely been silenced by education historians for a long time (Lawn 2008) – education has been one of the main pillars of building the 'national', as national stereotyping would continually separate and therefore define 'us' from 'them'.

Yet, this article will suggest that it is precisely in the dialectical relationship between travel and prejudice that the governing of European education and – why not – 'Europe' itself can more productively be understood. This article suggests that this antithetical relationship – which has to a large extent shaped European history – between a desire to move, travel, get to know one another, yet routinely, almost subconsciously finding those 'others' as different and hence unintelligible, is a particularly productive setting in which to investigate the production of European policy.

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Located in the field of the transnational governance of education, this article examines the case of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) as a key expert organization in the governing of European education; rather than focusing on higher education, the mobility and travel of which has been well-documented through scholarly work on the Bologna Process (Corbett 2005, Reichert and Tauch 2005, Keeling 2006), the article focuses on the area of compulsory education which has been much firmer rooted within national traditions and curricula, and thus considered fairly bounded and fixed. The article builds on previous research (Ozga *et al.* 2011) that suggested that European Commission (EC) and OECD recommendations are often received at the national level as homogeneous. Thus, questions about the relationship between the two organizations in terms of policy direction emerged. The topic is, of course, potentially very large; the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) project this article reports on focused on processes of policy teaching and learning within and between the OECD and the EC for the skills and competencies agenda.

More specifically, this research project aimed at establishing a preliminary, alternative perspective in the policy learning literature, which has so far been dominated by the impact of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) on national systems. Instead, it aimed at moving beyond top-down accounts of the mere and one-directional transfer of policy from the international to the national, towards more attention to the *interaction* and *mediation* across 'levels' and actors. The empirical research focused mainly on the analysis of discourse through an examination of eight key texts, through a focus on their 'texturing' effects and their role in establishing a new 'order of discourse', their chaining, and the extent to which boundary genres were being produced. A firm set of 15 actors from both the Commission and the OECD, as well as other relevant research agencies, was identified and interviewed; the interviews focused on the actors' role in processes of coordination (conferences, meetings, project work), their interactions with other actors within and beyond their organizations and other relational ties that link them and others through channels of flow of data, ideas and/or material resources. This article is built using mainly this latter work, namely, the interviews with the key policy actors. The policy actors interviewed and quoted in this article have had positions of power and significant decision-making leverage, and therefore in all cases first-hand experience and participation in meetings and debate between Directorate General Education and Culture (DGEAC) and the OECD in regard to the financing and conduct of large international assessments.

Hence, although previous work showed how the OECD became a major Europeanizing actor, having not only entered the European education policy arena but in fact monopolizing the attention and policy influence within it (Grek 2009), this article goes one step further; working with the specific case of international comparative testing, it examines how the OECD became a dominant education policy actor as a result of its deliberate and systematic mobilization by the EC,[1] which found in the OECD not only a great resource of data to govern (which it did not have before) but also a player who would be pushing the Commission's own policy agenda forward, albeit leaving the old subsidiarity rule intact. As I will show, testing is important because it produces numbers and consequently ratings and rankings; once the OECD has created this unprecedented spectacle of comparison in European education, no system can remain hidden and separate any longer. The field of measurement becomes instantly the field of the game.

In order to contextualize the case under question, the article begins by offering an explanation of the background, ideas and concepts that have been framing this research. I then move on to discuss the case of international comparative testing; we will briefly

sketch the main studies which have metamorphosed it into a spectacle of surveillance and control for national education systems and have had tremendous effects on education policymaking not only on participant countries but also on European education policy-making overall. I move on to explain and discuss the role of experts in this emergent European policy field and finish off by an examination of 'policy mobilization'; applying theory from the field of social studies of science and technology, the concepts of boundary work and 'boundary organization' (Guston 2000, Jasanoff 2004, St Clair 2006) are applied in order to show the ways that the OECD has transformed into a 'site of co-production' of both knowledge and social order (St Clair 2006).

Framing ideas and concepts

Europeanization and education

At least since the mid-1990s, studies of European integration have focused on explaining the building of Europe primarily through a top-down agenda, where 'Brussels' and its formal institutions and structures are the foremost and sometimes sole players in the field (Favell and Guiradon 2011). Hence, other fields of governing activity, such as education, have been persistently considered irrelevant, as the rule of subsidiarity would suggest that the national formally disallows any European policy links: recent research has however suggested that, in fact, the opposite is the case (Ozga *et al.* 2011). Having been seen as more fundamental in the building of nations rather than Europe, education as a field of action for the fabrication of a single European polity has been continuously misrecognized – nonetheless, education and culture were in fact the initial building blocks of the project 'Europe' (see Shore 2000, Pepin 2006, Grek 2008). On the other hand, this persistent omission might not simply be a misrecognition – more cynically, it could also reflect deeper and long-standing disciplinary hierarchies, which suggest that some scholarly work derives status and exclusive authority in the field of study through the exclusion of lesser 'others' – in this case, education (again, with exceptions – see Martens 2007).

Contrary to these dominant assumptions, education is a fruitful area for the analysis of Europeanizing processes, not only because of its role in nation building in Europe in the nineteenth century (Nóvoa 2002), but also and crucially through its more recent transformation from its former institutionalized and ordered sequences into a much more fluid and transnational phenomenon, that of (usually lifelong) learning (Lawn and Grek 2012). Lifelong learning across Europe became vital for the building of knowledge capitalism – it is (or so we are told) a prerequisite for economic growth and the cohesion of Europe. More importantly perhaps, learning has also become one of the most powerful tools for the governing of Europe, through the increased emphasis on what is more commonly referred to in the literature as 'policy learning' (Haas and Haas 1995, Bennett 1997, Steiner-Khamsi 2004, Raffe and Spours 2007). Either through meetings (such as those I discuss below) (Freeman 2008) or through the more direct and unforgiving comparison of country statistics (Grek 2009), learning from and with others is one of the leading modus operandi for the 'soft' governance and governing at a distance of the European people (Lawn 2003, Clarke and Ozga 2011).

The article builds on the questioning of two dominant conventions that have so far to an extent dictated our understanding of how Europe is constructed and mobilized; the first one, methodological nationalism, is endemic in the social sciences (Guiraudon 2003, Guiraudon and Favell 2009) and particularly in the field of education (Ozga 2008). Of course, given the unit of study, it is not surprising that education research is more or less nationally framed and nationally conducted. Nonetheless, this should not distract from the

fact that a lot of its focus during the last 30 years has also been 'applied' (although there are honorable exceptions, see, for example, Dale and Robertson (2008), Normand (2010), Ozga *et al.* (2011), Ball (2012), Ball *et al.* (2012)); focused usually on the school improvement agenda and therefore limited to an examination of classroom practice, it often appears as removed from broader questions regarding the governing of the social (Ozga *et al.* 2009). As a result, education research (at least in the Anglophone tradition) has lost much of its creative, inquisitive potential to locate and sociologically analyze a number of its actors who act as brokers between their national loci and 'Europe'.

In contrast, this article builds on – relatively recent – research which examined the interaction of national education systems with 'Europe' and the Europeanizing effects this produces (Ozga *et al.* 2011). Weaving the concepts of quality, governance and Europeanization into the analysis, this research showed how new and evolving practices of governing are forming and shaping European education identities and policy spaces. As suggested earlier, given the high profile that the OECD has acquired in education policy in recent years, this work evolved into an examination of the transnational policy learning taking place amongst the two major international actors, the OECD and the EC, in the field of international comparative assessment.[2] This research strived to understand and explain the massive growth in data production and use, its new capacity to flow across Europe (and beyond), and its new role in the fabrication of European education as a governable policy space. In order to contextualize the analysis, the following section will give a brief historical background to the formation of this new policy arena.

The European education space

Education policy activity in the EU could historically be classified in several ways; for those in favor of history through milestones, the Treaty of Rome (1957), the Single Act (1987) and the Maastricht (1992) and Amsterdam (1997) Treaties could be seen as the main four stages (1957–87, 1987–92, 1992–97 and 1997–2001) in this process (Shaw 1999). The European Education Policy Space was not determined merely by the fairly stable geographical boundaries of a common market; as early as the 1960s, it became a shared project and a space of meaning, constructed around common cultural and educational values, such as peace, social equality and solidarity, freedom of opinion, progress and innovation, cultural diversity and tolerance – many of these values are still highly referred to today (Adonnino 1985, EC 2007). These ideals had a strong social dimension which became particularly appealing and promising after the devastation and despair of the two World Wars. The Member States of the Union were invited in a project to build a social Europe which would establish itself as the significant 'Other' against the inhumanity of an economic system of winners and losers, which was accelerating to global dominance.

However, it soon turned out that the 'people's Europe' was not sufficient to respond to the demands of the new millennium. Despite subsidiarity, the field of education served for over three decades in the project of the creation of a European common identity. In history and geography and in narratives and tradition, Europe became a value in itself – education and culture, through overemphasizing commonalities and sidelining differences were handy crutches in lifting the idea of Europeanization (Delanty 1995).

At the same time, national education systems – at least in the West – remained more or less the same; they welcomed exchanges and networks as the additional European 'extra', which offered a fresher flavor of cosmopolitanism in their somewhat stale school curricula of the old Europe. Despite the systematic efforts to create a common European education space, education in the pre-Lisbon era remained largely a national topic (Novoa and Lawn

2002). In the face of globalization and the dominance of the knowledge economy, new and urgent technologies of persuasion had to be devised; the voluntary nature of the previous arrangement was too loose to respond to the severe economic challenges of both the education and the wider market (Pépin 2006). Creating, regulating and monitoring, or in other words, governing the European education space now had to be based on statistics and what Rose calls 'governing by numbers' (1999).

Recounting this history of the formation of the European education space, albeit briefly, is significant as it allows us to comprehend those defining events that turned the European education space from a rather idealistic project of cultural cohesion to the much sharper contemporary competitive reality; and second, it enables us to slowly understand how, when and why international comparative testing entered this space and, with what impact. This is important to take into account, since Europeanization represents yet another conduit of globalization; thus, the construction of education indicators by large, global, transnational organizations, like the OECD, World Bank or UNESCO, adds another layer of complexity to the picture. These data sets have now become the sine qua non of European education governance as they provide information regarding education in the nations which are both EU and OECD members; as a consequence – or perhaps a precondition – for their utilization in Europe, there has also been alignment in approaches to measurement and category construction. Statistical categories are now shared across all the major transnational organizations, with some being at the lead of measurement expertise; while the OECD is still predominantly a think tank focusing on matters of economic policy, it has created a niche as a highly technically competent agency for the development of educational indicators and comparative educational performance measures (Grek 2009). As we will discuss in the next section, OECD's PISA in particular, a non-curriculum-based measure of comparative educational performance of students at the end of compulsory schooling in literacy, mathematics, science and problem-solving, is dominant globally (at least in the Global North) as the key international comparative measure of the effectiveness of schooling systems. It is to these international comparative tests that we will now turn in order to construct our case and discuss the main foci of this article: the role of experts and policy mobilization.

The case of international comparative assessment: OECD, International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) and PISA

Indeed, testing has become the lifeblood of education governance in Europe and globally. It is more than simply a statistical project; rather, it has become part of consistent efforts to restore legitimacy and trust between populations and their governments. As Hall contends, 'building legitimacy requires potential users in the process, as well as technical experts. The most important role of indicator sets may be in framing the issues and defining the problems, rather than suggesting the solutions' (2009).

The governance of international comparative testing reflects these values. Project boards usually work in conjunction with a large range of consortia of international partners and technical advisors (statisticians, media specialists and, interestingly, philanthropists); they also consult with a vast array of different actor groupings, such as academics, private companies, policy makers, associates, country correspondents, regional working groups and others. Regular training courses are delivered as well as seminars, and regional, thematic and global conferences. Although all these initiatives suggest sustained efforts to include and create consensus with the greatest number of stakeholders possible, the role of experts remains central; before they acquire a more 'public' and

visible face, tests are being discussed, negotiated and indeed fought over among field experts for a long period of time.

The case of the OECD is particularly interesting because, unlike the EU, it has neither the legal instruments nor the financial levers to actively promote policymaking at the national level within member nations. Nonetheless, through ranking exercises such as the 'Education at a Glance' annual reports, the IALS, its Indicators in Education project, the more recent Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), which focuses on teachers, through PISA and national and thematic policy reviews, its educational agenda has become significant in framing policy options not only at the national but also, as it has been argued, in the constitution of a global policy space in education (Lingard *et al.* 2005, Grek and Lingard 2007, Ozga and Lingard 2007). This raises the question – what has transformed the OECD to one of the most powerful agents of transnational education governance? Martens (2007) has contributed substantially to this discussion suggesting that the 'comparative turn' – 'a scientific approach to political decision making' (2007, p. 42) – has been the main driver of OECD success. Through its statistics, reports and studies, it has achieved a brand which most regard indisputable; OECD's policy recommendations are accepted as valid by politicians and scholars alike, 'without the author seeing any need beyond the label "OECD" to justify the authoritative character of the knowledge contained therein' (Porter and Webb 2004).

Drawing on Marten's (2007) ideas, we can see that there is a taken for grantedness about education indicators, despite all the commentary asking for contextualization in their interpretation (e.g. Nóvoa and Yariv-Mashal 2003), and this is indicative of the way in which they have become an accepted part of the contemporary educational policy lexicon across the globe, within and well beyond the OECD, and of their growing significance to the work of the OECD itself since the 1980s. PISA now accounts for approximately 30% of the Education Directorate's budget inside the OECD and is funded directly by participating nations. One could suggest that the OECD's greatest impact has been in relation to its Indicators agenda, including PISA, and its role in constructing a global educational policy field through governance by comparison (Martens 2007, Ozga and Lingard 2007). Indeed, Antonio Nóvoa argued, 'comparing must not be seen as a method, but as a policy … the expert discourse builds its proposals through "comparative" strategies that tend to impose "naturally" similar answers in the different national settings' (2002, p. 144). Although that might be too stark a contrast, and although comparison can be both (there are certainly good epistemological reasons for comparative research that owe nothing to policy), it is still important to acknowledge the power of comparison as a governing technology.

There has been a range of such studies that the OECD has been organizing since the early 1990s, the majority of which were adult literacy studies initially, followed by the delivery of the most successful one, PISA, and more recently PIAAC, the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (2011). The first literacy study, for example, the IALS was the first and largest international comparative testing regime of its kind. Conducted from the early 1990s, it was an innovative study, as it was the first time ever that an international comparative dimension was added to the construction of a literacy survey instrument. Thus, it heralded a new era in the construction and evolution of international comparative studies, as for the first time ever it gave international testing a comparative dimension, where measurement against other countries' performance offered unprecedented visibility and thus exposure. As it was an original and new endeavor, slowly at the start but increasingly later on, IALS boosted confidence in the construction of measurement tools of this kind, increased their persuasive power in regard to their

validity and transparency and created substantial revenues to the research agencies administering them. Finally, and perhaps above all, it created a circle of like-minded expert communities, who found in these studies a platform for promoting the problematization of specific issues, their institutionalization through their exchanges and the setting up of the study, as well as their legitimation, in the form of advice to failing countries, once the results were published.

Following the successful IALS endeavor, the PISA became a major instrument in providing data for the European education systems almost from the start. The international dimension of the survey, which overrides the boundaries of Europe to compare student performance in countries as diverse as the United States, Greece and Indonesia, gave PISA a particularly significant weight as an indicator of the success or failure of education policy. While always testing reading, mathematical and scientific literacy, its innovative dimension – and part of its interest as a governing device – lies in the fact that it does not examine students' mastery of school curricula, rather the focus is on an assessment of young people's ability to practically apply their skills in everyday life situations. The focus on 'real-life' circumstances and on students' capacity to enter the labor market with core skills, such as literacy and numeracy, has taken PISA's focus of interest away from less explicit educational aims that resist measurement (e.g. democratic participation, artistic talents, understanding of politics, history, etc.), towards a more pragmatic view of education's worth: 'its relevance to lifelong learning' (OECD 2003). Finally and perhaps most significantly, a key feature of PISA is:

> its policy orientation, with design and reporting methods determined by the need of governments to draw policy lessons. (OECD 2003, no page numbers)

Hence, this is not simply a testing regime – it is constructed and operates under a clear and specific policy framework, which is to be adopted by the participant countries if they are to improve their future PISA assessments and thus improve their standing in attracting economic and human capital investment. In other words, the involvement of the OECD with the steering of education policy in participant countries does not stop with the publication of the PISA – or whichever study's – results; on the contrary, this is perhaps where it begins. Expert groups write expert reports, analyzed and taken forward by other national and local experts, while the Commission expert committees are also on board in order to keep the game in sight and keep it running. It is to the role of the experts therefore that we now have to turn to.

Steering the soup? Experts, conflicts and management of knowledge

The brief discussion of IALS and PISA above shows some of the reasons why international comparative testing has become one of the prime instruments in the steering and exchange of governing knowledge in education in Europe today. Their development has created the necessary preconditions for achieving policy understanding, travel, translation and thus, despite local idiosyncrasies and histories, policy consensus.

Nonetheless, the story of the development of international assessment should not misguide us towards the sketching of an ideal type of policy generation process where genuine debate and the building of relationships and collaborations produce new knowledge. Hugh Heclo (as cited by Freeman (2012)) described policy as a 'reverberating' cobweb of conditions, people and practices. Freeman uses this eloquent image to discuss

the collective production of meaning through meetings and documents; using Heclo's idea of 'collective puzzling' for the making of policy, he argues that

> this puzzling entails multiple acts of translation, but only to the extent that we can think of translation as generative, an active process of the production of meaning. It seems impossible to ask, at any given moment, 'where is policy?' for it seems to be always incipient, mobile, somewhere between. (Freeman 2012, p. 17)

International comparative testing is an excellent example of the kind of mobility of the policymaking process that Freeman describes; the discussion of the organization, preparation and delivery of international tests makes a case precisely for a close examination not only of the movement of policy in itself, but crucially of *those who move it*. The role of experts is central as their own in-depth and trusted knowledge allows them to be highly mobile; in the name of their specialized expertise, experts have to be numerous; they are employed by different policymaking and research organizations and are accountable to them alone; their expert knowledge suggests the need for them to be present and offer advice at different stages of the policymaking process, yet it is precisely this same trusted and objective knowledge that renders them invisible. They offer evidence for policy, yet their most important role is symbolic, that of the legitimization of knowledge (Boswell 2009).

This is the kind of status that the OECD acquired with the conduct of the big international tests; the seal of unequivocal, trusted truth which, as we will see further on, it took one step further into an almost amalgamation of knowledge into policy. Quantification, simplicity and measurability were the trio of the key ingredients of its success, as slowly yet surely the OECD managed to persuade that its statistical reasoning was not simply the conventional, partially constructed representation of very complex and different contexts but rather the objective reality. Econometrics became the single methodology for its measurements, whereas questions in regard to the epistemology or ethics of its analyses were never asked. Following Kingdon's (1984) policy soup model, OECD slowly gathered all the ingredients and the know-how in order to produce best-selling 'knowledge soup'; through its management and steering of knowledge production, it manages and steers new policy agendas and directions. Similar to Kingdon's (1984) idea of the primeval soup, ideas for research float around for some time; new avenues of researching education performance are always open. Given the expert marketing of the studies' results globally, failures in performance are broadcast widely; thus, the need for immediate action is necessary. Indeed, the persuasive power of the OECD lays in its construction and measurement of education indicators; the quantitative knowledge it produces is knowledge and action simultaneously, as no indicator has any purposeful existence unless it signals action (Lawn and Grek 2012).

In other words, OECD not only produces evidence quickly and effectively but also digests it and offers it to policymakers in the format of policy solutions. In a sense, if we are used to accounts of European policymaking as slow, cumbersome and 'coming from nowhere' (Richardson 2001, p. 21), the OECD bypasses these obstacles in four key ways; first, it defines the limits of the possible by suggesting what can be measured, hence what can be 'done'; second, it carries no political jurisdiction therefore it carries no external threats to national policymaking, as perhaps the Commission or other EU institutions might have done; it now has the experience, networks and the technical and material resources to speed up the policy process so that it can show 'results' within the usually short timeframe that policymakers are in power; and last but not the least, it carries all the

'right' ideological messages for education systems in the twenty-first century – that is, it connects learning directly to labor market outcomes and human capital.

Nonetheless, how has the OECD become such a powerful player in education governance in Europe? As some of the people who work there might have argued, the Education Directorate staffs who are based in Paris take a few decisions, if any; the OECD, as they argue, is no other than the participant countries and the national actors and experts sent to the OECD committees and meetings. Thus, how accurate is to examine the emergence of this new policy arena by simply focusing on this single international actor? This is where the initial juxtaposition between travel and prejudice is helpful again, as the story of the emergence of the OECD as an influential actor (mostly on the basis of its large international tests) is yet again a story of tension – the expert loves and expert wars that have been forming the history of international comparisons of performance measurement for over a decade.

> So around 2003–04, we [OECD and Commission] started becoming far more involved. Meetings all over the world, I don't know how many countries I visited but what is important is that the Commission is there…. The European member states should see that the Commission is there because one of the criticisms of the Commission since all this started was that we didn't take into account all the good work of the OECD. Which was wrong but they said it. The way of showing them was to actually be there – not an empty chair. (EC4)

Indeed, although the Commission and the OECD had been leading quite separate ideological paths, a new love affair began emerging – this relationship would gradually strengthen and eventually become the sine qua non for the governing of European education systems. Another interviewee was even more eloquent in his discussion of this flourishing relationship:

> We used to have great competition between the two institutions [OECD and the EC] which was that they were research-based, we were policy-based. And we needed that. They needed the policy aspect to mobilise the European consciousness … it was in their interest working with us …We had some differences but we are working closer and closer together, we are very very good friends now, there is no conflict. (EU3)

And of course love is power:

> When the OECD started speaking about TALIS [survey on teachers] it attracted the attention of the member states that all this is very good but it is expensive. … So I managed to convince my Director General of supporting (the OECD) with an awful lot of millions of euros. And I went back to the OECD with that message and said that of course if we pay we want influence. (EC7)

On the other hand, OECD actors appear also as quite open to the Commission, stressing from their own point of view, the reasons that the DG Education would work closely with them:

> First of all I think we've been very lucky that on the Commission side, that they've given a lot of emphasis to skills recently and they have this 'New skills for new jobs' initiative and so I think we were fortunate that the work that we decided to do on PIAAC corresponded extremely well with their areas of interest and research priorities… I think they have been attending these international expert meetings that have taken place developing the proposal for PIAAC and so they were already onboard at that stage and then when it looked like the project was going to go ahead and they had always been participating in these meetings, we

went out to speak to them and get them to agree to also provide some funding. So they made a direct contribution, an actual contribution to the international costs and also eventually agreed to subsidise EU countries, the cost that they had to pay as well to the OECD. So we got just a block of direct funding and indirect funding to countries that they then had to pay us for the international costs. That made a big contribution in financial terms and therefore of course enhanced interest in the project. (OECD3)

Another OECD actor also suggested the way that the relationship, rather than hostile, has been much closer recently, in fact 'hand in hand':

> We have the same perceptions like other international organisations that it is important that we work together and that we avoid duplication of effort and that we know what the other organisations are doing and that there are often occasions that jointly we can do more than what we can do individually. I think we were always aware of that but I think that has become increasingly important that we work hand in hand. And inevitably because we have some common goals. The OECD has had for some time its own job strategy, the Commission has its own employment strategy and its Lisbon goals and there is a lot of overlap. So, I think it is quite normal that we can cooperate on a lot of areas. (OECD5)

However, there is also a reverse side to the coin. If this is a world of travel, exchange and collaboration, more often than not these exchanges take place in a competitive field, where most large international research organizations strive to secure the limited and diminishing funding available from national governments for the conduct of these studies. As a result, collaboration among them for the delivery of studies and the collection of education statistics is not a choice anymore, but a necessity. Conflict and tensions can run deep:

> The main reason is that they are competitors and both in scientific and in financial terms it is getting more and more difficult to conduct these surveys. There was a message from member states to the OECD and the IEA[3] – get together, sit down and discuss it and do it. Now, 6 months later, we all come together and we ask what was the result of that meeting and the answer was that we didn't find a date. They don't work together because they don't like each other. (EC9)

Interviewees also describe internal conflict within international organizations and their departments, for example, within the OECD itself. The following quotation describes the conflict between the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) and the Directorate of Education, similar to the kinds of processes Jullien and Smith (2010) describe when they discuss IOs as internally unstable institutions, rather than the opposite:

> They live in different worlds – the same floor at the OECD but in different worlds. They don't like each other – one is more research-based, the other one more indicators and data, surveys. One is more reflection, the other one is more publicity, the charts – different traditions, the same director. (EC12)

Finally, another account that describes the conflict and competition for securing contracts for education research in Europe comes from another interviewee, a key member of staff of one of the Commission's research agencies:

> I think because the OECD is very much looking for member states' subsidies and grants and financial support for each separate research activity, they are also keen in showing that they do something unique and innovative in order to get such funding. And so then in a way they

are in competition with us. An example is they did a recent policy review which is called 'Learning for Jobs' which basically deals with VET. And they didn't invite us to some national expert groups and so on that are in development – and they did very little use of our work because they wanted to do something that was different and specific so that they could sell it to the member states – this is my interpretation, of course. But I think that there is this kind of competition, differentiation between European institutions because we are in competition for funding. (EC3)

The quotations presented above suggest that descriptions of a field of actors who come together regularly and on equal terms to achieve consensus for the pushing of certain agendas might be false. On the contrary, they highlight the need to also focus our attention and study on those meetings that never happen, as well as those actors who are consistently not invited to expert meetings. They direct us to an understanding of a field, which is riddled with internal and external competition for funding, especially in times of reducing national budgets in an era of austerity. Nonetheless, the emerging data make the whole picture even more interesting, especially given the emphasis on the role of the meeting for the development of shared understandings (Freeman 2012). Here is another EC actor:

We create an expert group, we do the same as the OECD, we ask member states to designate experts. … Actually member states are represented by different people who have different views around the same questions. Very often I would almost kill myself at the meetings because I would say, well that is what we've just decided with the member states yesterday. And the member states were sitting there, saying we've never heard of it. And we don't agree. …What you discover … is that people don't know each other – they don't even know the others exist. They have never heard of them. They come from different institutions, different backgrounds, different interests, policies, objectives. The member states are not even aware of these contradictions. The result of it is that they don't have any influence. (EC10)

And he continues:

… I am not sure if it is in the interest of the OECD or the Commission to solve that problem – because these institutions will benefit from that – the more they contradict each other, the more the institutions decide. …. And with OECD, surely it is the same. This is so obvious – that's what they do – OECD is (NAME). We always have a joke with (NAME) – where he is brilliant, is to conclude. He is fantastic in this – conclusions! He is the conclusions expert – they are in before the meeting (laughs). … It is very convenient. (EC10)

In order to close this section, I will briefly return to the beginning: there we argued that Europe is constructed through travel and prejudice; this is also reflected in the study of the governing of Europe, given both the exchange of ideas that attempt to understand and explain it, as well as the disciplinary limitations and hierarchies which have so far seen the field of education as of lesser relevance and explanatory significance. On the contrary, the article suggested that the education policy arena is a key perspective in understanding Europe not only because it has become central in the discourses and policy direction followed by the Commission but also, and perhaps more importantly, because the process of learning from, with and at times despite others, is at the heart of the everyday realities of what policymakers do. Having examined the case of international comparative assessment, the article showed how the education policy agenda in Europe was not simply assembled at the Madou corridors and meeting rooms of the DG Education and Culture; on the contrary, an unlikely actor, given its global and (mostly US resourced) research

agenda, became influential and soon arose to dominate the field. But how did this come about?

> The OECD didn't have an agenda on education policy … [So] the Commission thought, and I fought this for years, that the OECD had to adopt the same agenda as we had developed in Brussels. So van der Pas, the Director General, went to meetings with the OECD and argued for their work, the annual work of the OECD should be the same as the one we have. He argued for and pushed that what we have as a policy agenda should also be relevant for the OECD. (EC10)

And he continues:

> We ended up inspiring OECD to adopt a policy agenda – and that they did with member states. They see the member states and have meetings with the ministers… So they [member states] go to the institution which they are most influenced by or more easy to work with, or it is more convenient in terms of the political context in the country – which puts the European Commission in a weak situation because in fact we are the threat to the member states despite of the fact that we follow the Treaty etc. and we are a policy organisation. The OECD isn't. So if you want to weaken the European Commission then you go to the OECD and discuss the same subject matters there. That shift has weakened the Commission and signals the need strongly for the Commission and the OECD to work together. The more you do that the more you have the need to have close cooperation between us, a competitive cooperation, a cooperation of influence, who decides, who draws conclusions. (EC10)

The case of the OECD adopting a policy agenda is a case of an international knowledge actor being mobilized, influenced, perhaps even pushed, to become a policy actor in itself. This is not simply a case of knowledge informing policy, as is most commonly the case; it is in fact a fusion of the two realms in such a conscious and strategic manner that raises interesting questions regarding the extent of the technicization and de-politicization of education problems in particular and perhaps governing problems more broadly. In a way, it signals a shift from knowledge and policy to knowledge *becoming* policy – where expertise and the selling of policy solutions drift into one single entity and function. The next and final section will attempt a preliminary theorization of these ideas in order to broaden understanding in regard to the role of transnational expert organizations in education governance and governance in more general terms.

Discussion: policy mobilization and the rise of 'competitive cooperation'?

A central issue arising from this analysis is the relationship between the production of knowledge and policy. There is a vast literature on the knowledge and policy continuum as well as on their coproduction, especially in the field of 'hard' science. Analyses from the field of studies of science and technology have explored the new regulatory role of transnational expert institutions, like the OECD, that are meant to possess both the knowledge base and the expert networks to produce scientific evidence for policymaking. In an interesting analysis of the World Bank in producing policy to combat global poverty, St Clair has masterfully shown the negotiated nature of the 'objective' data offered by such institutions: 'definitions and assessments are not account of facts, but rather "fact-surrogates", well-structured parts of an ill-structured and complex whole' (St Clair 2006, p. 59). St Clair draws on Désrosieres to discuss the relativity of statistics in the pursuit of knowledge for policymaking; she shows how the choice of what and who counts as expert in producing evidence for policy is not only a methodological question but also an

epistemological and a moral one. Applying insights from science and technology studies, St Clair suggests that the transnational expert organizations have to be analyzed on the basis of their 'boundary work', that is in relation to their ability not only to produce knowledge but also new social orders. She discusses the problematic and self-fulfilling nature of what she calls the 'circular dynamics' of expert knowledge, since – she suggests – the audiences that are meant to legitimate the knowledge produced are in fact audiences that have, to a large extent, been generated by the expert organization itself. Finally, she uses the work of Jasanoff (2004) and Guston (2000) to make a case for the role of international organizations as 'boundary organizations':

> The crucial role of these institutions is, then, to assure the stability between the domains of science and politics, to speak to principals in both domains and to do so in a way that integrity and productivity can be assured. Speaking differently to different audiences, boundary organisations can bring stability to usually controversial issues. …[they] may be a way to avoid the politicisation of science as well as the scientification of politics. (St Clair 2006, p. 68)

The OECD has become the boundary organization *par excellence* in the field of transnational education governance. With its work on the construction of performance indicators and more recently with its success in international comparative testing, it has emerged as central producer of policy-oriented knowledge in the developed world; and it offers not only measurable and comparable data but also – what is considered – reliable guidance for policymaking. Because of the OECD, assessing education is often presented simplistically as an empirical problem open to quantification, and hence improvement, rather than also as an epistemic and political endeavor. Through the networks it has developed both in the scientific and the policy world, the OECD has become a central node in the structuring of the global education policy field. However, how has this come about? If boundary work is necessary for policymaking in controversial policy fields, such as genomics, climate change, migration or global poverty, what is it about education that requires this kind of dual agency, the need to be speaking to and persuading both patrons and peers?

There may be two answers to this question: first, the nature and history of education policymaking in Europe and second, the lack of a dynamic by DG Education and Culture in shaping policy in European member states. Starting from the latter, the data has shown how, why and when the OECD was influenced by the Commission to adopt a policy agenda. In other words, the OECD became a policy actor and indeed a key one, not simply out of its own accord and expert moves; it was *mobilized* to become one. This is where the concept of policy mobilization is helpful, as it may offer an explanation of the rise of transnational expert institutions as sites of coproduction of knowledge and social orders. Policy then is perhaps not everywhere, and it might not be as fluid and as ephemeral as previous analyses might have shown it to be. At least in the field of European education policy, and as the data above has shown, policy travel has had clear points of departure and arrival, as well as carriers and receivers; when the OECD developed the expertise to conduct large international comparative tests and thus had for the first time relevant evidence for policymaking, it also acquired reputation and recognition in the field – characteristics that DGEAC had never managed to have. National policymakers began turning to the OECD for evidence to legitimize policy choices at home and so – surprisingly perhaps – did the Commission. Since the OECD had both the data and the persuasive power to change policy direction at nation-states, DGEAC could use it as a point of mediation between its own policy agendas and national education systems. This is where St Clair's description of the 'circular dynamics' of the

policymaking process appears to have also been the case in education governance, too; both organizations, the OECD and the Commission, have been seeking legitimization for the knowledge and policy they produce from continuously turning to one another.

The mobilization of policy however was soon to become policy competition; the OECD acquired such dominance in the field that the Commission and its agencies have often been sidelined in the policy process. What this might mean for the future of European education governance is still to be seen; nonetheless, what is certain is that the Commission now has another policy actor to always take into account – if this actor will be friend or foe remains to be seen.

Friends or foes, loves or wars, travels or prejudice – contrasts and oppositions keep on writing the history of European education policymaking. As I tried to show earlier, the construction of the European education policy space was one of the continuous battles against a resisting nation-state education system which had embedded traditions and histories that were threatened by its emergence. Indeed, in the face of increasing internationalization and globalization, national education systems have been strengthened as education is seen as an important policy area, still administered nationally and locally. Global and European policy actors are faced with strong local pedagogies and traditions, which for some are still seen as the cornerstone of the idea of the nation-state itself. Thus, in contrast to other policy areas like climate change or genomics, for example, the controversy that a boundary organization like the OECD deals with is not a scientific one; rather, it is deeply political and historical, and therefore perhaps presents even greater risk-taking when it comes to proposing reforms both at home and in 'Europe'. And this is perhaps why international comparative testing is of such interest; given the conflictual rather than consensual nature of the relation between the national and 'Europe', the OECD has become not only a site for the coproduction of knowledge and education policy, but also a powerhouse.

Notes on contributor

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Notes

1. By 'European Commission', I refer more specifically to the Commission's Directorate General Education and Culture (DGEAC).
2. The paper builds on the Economic and Social Research Council funded research project entitled 'Transnational Policy Learning: A comparative study of OECD and EU education policy in constructing the skills and competencies agenda' (2010–2012)(RES-000-22-3429).
3. IEA is the acronym for the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement. IEA became a legal entity in 1967, but its origins date back to 1958 when a group of scholars, educational psychologists, sociologists and psychometricians met at the UNESCO Institute for Education in Hamburg, Germany, to discuss problems of school and student evaluation.

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