The rise of transnational education governance and the persistent centrality of the nation[1]

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Given the complexity and controversiality of the matter, it is perhaps not a coincidence that Piattoeva and Tröhler's article is one of the few that offers a fresh critical perspective on the central role of the nation in transnational education governance. In a sea of emergent literature on the influence of international large-scale assessments (Kamens, 2013; Pizmony-Levy and Harvey 2014; Maddox 2018), little attention[2] appears to be given to the persistent 'stickiness' of national education policy agendas, myths and histories. Despite the pervasiveness of the global agendas of international comparative testing and the apparent growing convergence of education discourses and practices, education still retains its unique, nationally defined and nationally bounded complexity (Tröhler and Lenz, 2015). It is, after all, one of the few policy arenas that still carries both the promise of a better future and the blame for most social ills.

Although the question of the role of the national after the emergence of global learning metrics is complex, there are certain givens to be discussed first. On the one hand, international comparative learning assessments, or even larger education monitoring agendas, like the construction of the Sustainable Development Goal 4[3], are *in need of* the existence of strong and powerful nations that can provide the financial and technocratic resources to support these transnational agendas, and use their political clout to shape them. Thus, in some ways, the continuous re-construction of the Nation[4] and of national identity are integral to the making of the transnational. In other words, transnational agendas cannot exist without the 'buy-in' of nations ; the latter, on the other hand, have to modernize discourses of the 'nation' and continuously re-make national identity taking into account contemporary narratives and shifts. In addition, national identities are often rebuilt on the basis of nations appearing as contributors to the global liberal, progressive and democratic world order. Although strong nations always seem to be on the driving seat of global education reforms, the participation of 'weaker' nations is equally necessary, as they take part in these processes either because they aim at a place on the world stage, or they are the recipients of the cultural diplomacy and 'generosity' of their stronger counterparts. As numerous global initiatives have shown – with the construction of the SDG4 being the latest of them- a certain sort of colonialism has never completely abandoned the education field (Addey 2014).

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[2] With the exception of the Swedish Research Council funded grant 'From Paris to PISA: Governing Education by Comparison, 1867-2015', which looked precisely on the role of Sweden in the construction of the European education policy space (PI: Professor Christian Lundahl, University of Orebro).

[3] For more information on SDG4, please look at https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg4

[4] Also, in policy terms, there is frequently a conflation between Nation and State. This is especially problematic in EU governance, whose policies have erroneously equated the bureaucratic apparatus of administration with the multiple legitimate nationalities that live in it. I owe this important observation to my colleague Dr Matteo Ronzani.

On the other hand, it is also undeniable that the last twenty years have seen an explosion of quantification in governing. Statistics have transformed the way societies are governed. Although some might suggest that the rise of statistics was always central to the making of the nation, public policy has gone through a paradigmatic shift due to the unprecedented penetration of the logic of quantification in both the social and the personal spheres (Hansen and Porter 2012; Merry 2011; Sauder and Espeland 2009). If governments once needed statistics to govern, it appears increasingly that governing by numbers has acquired such pervasiveness in the organizational structures and logics of (education) ministries and their agencies that numbers now comprehensively govern *them*. There is no planning, no understanding, no system, no forecast, no accountability mechanism, no overview and no budget, that has not been conquered by the allure of numbers in order to make sense of organizations and their purpose. Powered by high technology, the rise of social media and the transformative power of the acceleration of travel (of people, as well as of material artefacts and ideas), quantification has multiplied the effects of commensuration, comparison and national competition over 'softer' goods, such as reputation and status (Werron 2015). Whereas once nations could be voluntary teachers or learners of best practice from elsewhere (Rinne 2008; Grek 2009), such privileged positions are now spared. Coupled with the threat of climatic planetary destruction (already well under way), we are now facing radical changes in the ways that nations understand themselves and their place in the world. Although nations are still central to transnational governance, we could suggest that this is the brave new world of the nation in the world and the world in the nation – nowadays, it is never too easy -or desirable, for some at least- to completely separate between the two.

Contrary to Piattoeva and Tröhler's argument which sees the sustained centrality of the nation as a paradox, globalization coupled with the upsurge of quantification, might suggest that perhaps the opposite is the case. In other words, the more education governance is decided upon at 'levels' that span traditional geographical territories, like the local or the international, the more there is urgent need to find willing actors at home. Interdependence is the new game in town and like any game, it has to have winners and losers. Ultimately, the competition for the 'softer' goods of reputation, status and agenda-setting keep the game going and the actors engaged, wherever these actors may be. Actors are not 'fixed'; rather, we encounter them straddling 'levels' back and forth, brokering knowledge and ideas and advancing their own positions and career ladders as they do (Smith 2009).

Despite the centrality of quantification in the making of international learning assessments, brokerage, mediation and the construction of consensus are also key functions of large IOs (Grek 2017). We see a huge amount of concentration of their efforts to achieve buy-in of nations all over the globe, sometimes at the expense of data robustness. There is a variety of reasons why national actors respond to these concerted efforts. These may be a certain fear of missing out (if they do not engage), as well as the prospect of participating in a certain form of policy 'marketplace' or educational 'agora' (Lindblad, Petterson and Popkewitz 2018): it is only by going to the policy 'market' that actors come to know what they want.

Focusing precisely on the key role of actors, as they bring together both official national discourses and institutional logics, as well as informal, tacit and traditional 'ways of doing' things, I will now sketch three analytical propositions on studying the national/transnational conundrum:

1. *Despite their discursive convergence, the national policy responses to global education agendas are divergent and deeply embedded in local histories and contemporary politics: there is no unitary response or 'one size fits all'.*

After almost 20 years of the regular publication of the PISA country rankings, any efforts to generalize and systematize country responses to the international evidence seem as if they are destined to fail. Although we have seen the rise of eager 'learners' like the examples of Finland (Ozga et al 2010), Germany (Grek 2009) and Sweden (Grek 2017), many countries still appear reluctant to push for significant reforms as a result of global pressures and negative results.

The Swedish case, with its strong tendencies towards the marketisation of education and the subsequent over-reliance on the OECD in the search for quick remedies, is a telling example of the enormous influence of international education agendas on the nation. Prior to 2015, the negative Swedish PISA results sounded alarm bells in the land which was for the greatest part of the 20th century seen as the model European education system. Instead of relying on local expertise, Swedish policy actors turned to the OECD for policy advice. As a result, the OECD is now holding a privileged position in terms of having become the key advisory organization for Swedish education policy reforms; arguably, presently it seems almost inconceivable that Sweden would take any radical new policy orientation without the prior consultation with the OECD (Grek 2019).

On the other hand, the discussion of eager learners, such as Sweden and Germany, has for a long time masked the reluctance of the majority of countries to adopt any significant policy reforms as a result of a negative performance. England or the United States are good examples of a much more lacklustre and passive response, despite their stubbornly mediocre results (Grek 2009). Although the publication of the PISA rankings stirs quite a bit of media debate at their release, the spectacle of country league tables quickly diminishes.

Interestingly however, reluctance to adopt external policy recommendations does not mean disengagement from producing these global discourses and performance agendas. As we know, the US was the country which encouraged and financially supported the OECD to develop a globally comparative measurement agenda (Lingard and Grek 2007); England, together with Sweden and Norway, on the other hand, are often at the forefront of the statistical measurement project built around the SDG4 - they are often described as key actors in framing the SDG4 ideas and strategic planning[5]. Paradoxically, unresponsiveness to top-down policy recommendations does not necessarily mean lack of engagement; on the contrary, the slow learners seem too busy leading the global educational reform agenda to adopt it themselves.

[5] This is backed from interview data from the project METRO, currently being written up as the project findings and analysis – please contact the author for more information.

2. *The role of a meso-level between the national and international has to be properly identified and examined; the relationship of nations with large IOs like the OECD, or with political projects like the European Union, is continuously mediated and 'massaged' by a range of third parties, from think tanks and the various experts, to data agencies and private education and research contractors.*

Research in the field of international learning assessments and their impact usually sees their emergence within the duality of the presence of large and powerful international organisations and individual nations in receipt of the former's mantra and monitoring practices. Such a binary conceptualisation of the national vs. the international risks masking the political work of a range of actors that carry all the labour of mediation and translation, often assuming different identities depending on the context they work in. Historically, major education figures who straddled the national boundary effortlessly, moving ideas back and forth, are aplenty: Torsten Husén, for example, is very well-known, not only as a major Swedish education actor, who influenced Swedish education policy making a great deal, but someone who also internationalised widely (Lawn 2013).

More recently, we see that education testing agencies, such as ACER in Australia and ETS in the US, private actors such as Pearson or the global 'edu-business' (Verger et al 2017), have constructed a new meso-level acting back and forth between the global and the national. Although most of them are considered national 'assets' (both in terms of their epistemic but also financial value), they operate at the level of the transnational, contracting out their work to various 'experts', who feel scientifically and morally obliged to offer their services for the promise of better governing that evidence-based policy making has so laboriously made. Any effort to label these actors as either national or global fails to see the essence of their success and function, as they are *neither*. Actors inhabiting this meso-level assume their identities depending on the context of their work, the political circumstances, their ideological allegiances, their technical ability, the sources funding and their job opportunities.

3. *The forces of populism and nationalism are on the rise across Europe and in the US. This may be leading to some sort of education 'protectionism': a folding back of internationalism in favour of a retreat to a nostalgia for education as a guarantor of patriotism, nationalism and the old, pre-globalisation, 'golden' days of the nation-state.*

So far little attention has been given by education researchers to the phenomena of 'Trumpism', Brexit or the rise of extreme right-wing ideologies all over Europe and the western world. Although the effects of those on education governance are still quite premature to observe, yet recent harsh criticism of PISA by Mark Schneider, the director of the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences, points towards a remarkable shift in the American position towards PISA. Of course, this is not the first time that PISA has been criticised; quite the contrary. The controversiality of the PISA rankings has possibly so far been one of the main reasons for its visibility and persuasive power (Melvang 2019). Yet, the criticisms by Schneider were so harsh and persistent (about PISA's

testing domains and cycle[6]) that prompted a thorough response[7] by Michele Bruniges. Bruniges, the Australian chair of the PISA Governing Board, stated that 'obviously, governments change, and the views of governments change', alluding to the Trump administration's oddities and particularities towards its relationship with global governance and the world order. This response led to another one by Schneider, where he emphatically suggested that,

'The United States—a supporter of PISA from its inception—agrees that PISA is an important yardstick by which countries can measure their educational success. It is true that governments and policies change but the U.S. commitment to PISA has not.
Certainly, former U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan played an active role supporting and using PISA. Our current U.S. Education Secretary Betsy DeVos is also supportive of PISA. She has used PISA results to help inform her recent visits to high-performing countries, such as Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands.
To be clear, it is *not* the case that the United States is losing interest in PISA or reducing its support for PISA. Nor is the United States' concern for PISA driven by politics' (Schneider 2019, at https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2019/02/27/where-is-pisa-headed.html)

One would have thought that this was a single occasion of a fiery debate between two powerful actors in PISA's administration. Nevertheless, Schneider came back quickly afterwards, this time to criticise the OECD's flagship new test, PISA for Development[8]. His criticism related to PISA's expansion. His article caused another response by Bruniger, yet again justifying the OECD's choices and the epistemic robustness of the new test[9]. Schneider returned with a response to Bruniger's piece, damning PISA's 'willy-nilly' expansion, as he called it. This time however, he did not offer the same reassurances as before:

'My concerns stand: that the OECD is pursuing global growth without considering the effects of continued expansion on the technical quality and validity of its data. Specifically, I pointed out that current questions about the validity of PISA's comparisons "will grow worse as OECD pursues its global ambition of having about 100 non-member countries take part" in PISA. The methodological advances of PISA, as laudable as they are, have not sufficiently addressed these concerns.

Complacency about PISA's future — and the unwillingness of the OECD to discuss the implications of its global ambitions — is exactly why I wrote my commentary in the first place' (Schneider 2019 in https://www.the74million.org/article/mark-schneider-my-response-to-essay-rebuttal-im-concerned-about-the-pisa-exams-future-and-the-implications-of-its-sponsors-global-ambitions/)

To conclude: although it is still too early to know whether there is a real shift in the US support of PISA (an issue that if proved the case would have enormous repercussions not only for PISA but for transnational education governance at its core), the exchanges above

6 https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2019/02/01/is-pisa-a-victim-of-its-own.html

7 https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2019/02/06/what-were-getting-right-with-pisa.html

8 https://www.the74million.org/article/mark-schneider-pisa-is-a-unique-resource-for-testing-educational-attainment-of-15-year-olds-in-78-countries-adding-40-more-is-a-mistake/

9 https://www.the74million.org/article/response-allowing-more-countries-to-participate-in-the-pisa-exam-enables-innovation-and-fosters-diversity-

show that some kind of change in the US stance is brewing. Is this the Trumpian legacy and influence? Or is this a case of objectivity-making and technocratic robustness kicking back and requiring their righteous place at the pinnacle of metrological realism?

It is surely too soon to predict. What is for certain is that the days of the centrality of the nation are not over yet. As Piattoeva and Tröhler suggest and this article has shown, the combination of national policy contexts seeking for external legitimation, together with the rise of a range of experts mediating between the national and international, and the emergence of a political shift towards the right, all suggest that the question of the nation and its influence on global governance should be a central one for education, and more generally transnational governance research.

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