



Meyer, H.-D. & Benavot, A.: PISA, Power, and Policy. The emergence of global educational governance

Hungarian Educational Research Journal
2013, Vol. 3(3) 89–92
© The Author(s) 2013
<http://herj.lib.unideb.hu>
Debrecen University Press



DOI: 10.14413/HERJ2013.03.09.

Reviewed by Balázs Török

With the advancement of globalization evaluation based on comparison–competition that is- has become stronger as it regards national education systems. PISA measurements create rankings and the education policymakers of countries who fall behind pay attention to countries that are in the forefront. However, from the point of view of globalization processes in education, the main question is not who can get to the top of the rankings and how, but in what way are the rules of the competition made. Similarly, Bernie Ecclestone is considered the omnipotent leader of Formula 1 races as he personally shapes the rules which determine how the teams and pilots can gain a position. In the same way as Ecclestone is the “owner” of Formula 1, the owner of the global competition in education is the OECD which originally was an organization serving economic purposes. How do the processes and procedures related to PISA influence our way of thinking about education systems? What kind of global power structures are being created in the field of education policy?

These and similar essential questions are dealt with by the studies in the volume edited by A Meyer, H.-D., and Benavot published by Oxford Symposium Books in 2013. The concept of the editors was that the PISA had to be investigated because it has an institution-building force in global education.

As it usually is the case with analysis of policy related topics the volume does not have a single theory for analysing the impact of the PISA analysis. Each of the 14 studies in the book paint an image of the role of PISA in shaping national and global education policymaking from a different thematic angle. The contribution of the volume to the analysis of supranational education policy is that it presents the origin and impact of PISA from different points of view. In the following, we will briefly review the book by describing the different approaches of the studies, without going into details about all of them.

In the first chapter we get an overview of the results of evidence-based education research that has been inspired by PISA and follow the strict methodological rules of the

survey. The author analyses the topics of 74 peer-reviewed studies and concludes that the secondary analyses of PISA have produced an evolution in the field of quantitative education research based on strict methodological principles. It is also true though, that the knowledge production is fragmented and it is not easy to bring its results to those who think in terms far away from those of exact research evidence (for example: parents, stakeholders, politicians). The precise results of research can rarely impact the users directly. The PISA results of Finnish students are outstanding, however this was not the only reason for including in the volume three studies dealing with Finland. The studies investigate how much the Finnish education system is operated differently from what is recommended in the PISA analyses of the OECD. The authors consider it a paradox that the PISA survey awards first place to a country that consequently ignores the educational reform propositions of the OECD-INES. Finland is far away from adopting the accountability driven, standardised test-based global model of education governance. The Finnish public education system does not use an external evaluation system for teachers nor centrally administered exams or national tests. According to the studies, their outstanding results on the PISA test is due to the autonomy of its institutions, the sense of responsibility of the teaching staff, the high prestige of teachers in society as well as the validity of social democratic and agrarian traditions that consider equity a priority. The local-institutional level is mostly resistant to the challenges, the new forms of governance based on competition and accountability/measurements transmitted from the supranational level. Locality-local-culture can thus be considered as a protective factor in the case of the Finnish education system. The 4th chapter that compares the math results of Finland and Flanders also calls the attention to the importance of local, cultural factors. It draws the conclusion that the comparison of two countries based on seemingly identical PISA results can lead to false findings if we disregard the cultural characteristics. The need for taking cultural issues into consideration when interpreting PISA results comes up in other studies as well. According to the ninth chapter the PISA surveys neglect variables otherwise frequently applied in education research such as individualism/collectivism, ethnic homogeneity/diversity or the culture-specific indicators of accepting authority. The 10th chapter mentions the importance of cultural factors in relation to East-Asian PISA results of countries. The inner need for achievement, the learning strategies and meta-cognitive skills of East-Asian students, the demanding and more exact requirements of East-Asian teachers and the considerable learning support given by families are important variables explaining the PISA results.

The 5-6. chapter which deals with the PISA surveys from the historical point of view, goes back to the 1950-60ies when the audit culture gained ground in relation to the quantitative scientism of North-American social sciences. The studies point out that educational measurements and the PISA dates back to the sputnik panic in 1957 in the USA when education became an issue of national security. In the educational reforms were not just initiated by political actors, but by foundations representing economic interests, scientific organizations (psychologists) and military- technical institutions

(engineers) got a role in them as well. The technocratic nature of the reform goals is visible from the fact that the reformers mainly expected improvements in the fields of math, science and literacy skills. It was mainly due to the compensatory efforts of the USA that the PISA measurements were launched in the above mentioned subject areas and that the PISA measurements and diagnosis show similarities with the business-minded and technocratic education policy methods of the US. Although after the disintegration of the Soviet Union treating the efficiency of education as a risk of national security did not make sense anymore, the political governance did not loosen up the control of the field. They only renewed the semantic framework, so the goal was not to defeat the Soviet Union any more, but to maximize the economic action potential or competitiveness. In other words, the development of individual competences in order to maximize the contribution of each employee to the annual growth of the GDP thus fostering the global material wellbeing. This renewed semantics was based on a development-fanaticism and a human resources theory providing an opportunity for further developing the global governance of education. The study shows that the cooperation and developments coordinated by the OECD fit into the global expansion of neoliberal market capitalism even though the OECD analyses criticize its negative social impacts.

The volume details the role of the scientific dimension of PISA in shaping the power structure. The authors of the 8th chapter interpret the strengthening of global education governance from the epistemological point of view and claim that global educational governance has an epistemological basis. The education policy discourses, the peer review method and the comparative analyses provide a semantic framework determined and limited by quantitative methodology. This framework encompasses policy proposals presented as logical to policymakers. The closed conceptual system of diagnoses, recommendations and data- in the same way as a hidden curriculum- narrows down the range of decisions. At the same time, there is a demand from the leaders of modern and each time more complex societies for a clear system of developmental goals that can be easily operationalized. From this chapter we can learn that leaders of societies that are aspiring to move forward in the global economic competition show keen interest in the education development recommendations based on PISA. This is true, in spite of the fact that due to the cultural neutrality of the OECD's policy goals, education policymakers have to deal with serious implementation deficits in countries with strong behavioural/teaching traditions. The study proves that the OECD can be regarded as an organization that has carried out epistemological accumulation and investment of capital, which fosters the spreading of a certain global model of governance and society through its policy-influencing capacities. The studies have introduced the reader to the main theoretical constructions whose essential characteristics are that they can build on the self-reflexive capacities of education systems and thus integrate such normative rules into educational governance which reinforce the global coordination and standardization of education systems. This purpose is served by well-known theories such as the theory of human resources,

competence strategy and commitment to growth. One of the results of OECD's work is the convergence of the goal systems of national education policies. Another one is the growing use of process-models as education governance tools based on PISA diagnoses and proposals for solutions. Let us also mention that these type of collections of studies can have a special role in the case of countries which have less developed capacities for policy analysis. In a small country – such as Hungary – the group of education analysts is small and undifferentiated and thus in certain periods of government education policy can get dominated by the influence of OECD's policy-shaping activity. Hungary's current aspiration to autonomy has its antecedents. Before 2010 in the period when OECD diagnoses and recommendations gained momentum, the processes of inner self-reflection of the education system were weakened. This lack of self-reflection resulted in disorganization in the education system, since the self-interpretation and self-governance of the system diminished and the governance in many ways followed the diagnosis and recommendations produced in the supranational level. This unusual thirst for autonomy in the Hungarian education system can be traced back to the earlier dominance of an external, supranational governance.

To sum up, we can claim that the high quality, widely distributed PISA analyses carried out by OECD can be well-complemented by this collection of studies that contain several different critical approaches analysing the topic from the historical, cultural, epistemological, methodological, statistical and policy points of view. Thus they provide a mirror that helps us reinterpret the significance of the PISA measurements in the field of education policy. (We can assume, that it is not a coincidence that the existing structures of power and global governance mentioned in the title are only slightly touched upon in the volume).

Knowledge-based societies are emerging and this involves the risk that education governance gets under the influence of scientifically formalized interpretations of education. It is important to clarify which groups of experts and corporative agents have access to the models and constructions of reality related to education systems. The OECD which represents the economic sector has an advantage in this sense, in the same way as Ecclestone, since he is the first to know what the competition will be like in the future. The volume calls the attention to the fact that no process of acquiring knowledge is free of interests and the OECD, which represents the business world, has its utilitarian objectives. But the human process of acquiring knowledge has its own interests as well and equality encourages us to free, autonomous and critical thinking. This volume can help us in this endeavour, to cite the 12th chapter: "we follow the best traditions of Western thinking when we question the authority of global evaluators, interpret their messages in their contexts, outline their usefulness and thus increase the wisdom and capacity of understanding of both the creators and the users of the tests."