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## Socialisation, learning and the OECD's *Reviews of National Policies for Education*: the case of Sweden

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### ABSTRACT

This paper suggests that the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) education policy work of the last 20 years has achieved a paradigmatic shift in the thinking and framing of education; however, this process was not exclusively based and dependent upon the cold rationality of numbers. Crucially, as the article will show, it has also involved processes of socialisation and learning. The paper argues that a constructivist-institutionalist perspective based on the notion of socialisation provides adequate tools to explain the dominance of the OECD in the education policymaking world. The paper makes use of policy learning theory to show how and why it is the coming together of various actors in social terms that sustains and reinforces the numbers game, rather than simply the validity or strength of the numbers themselves. It uses the case of the publication of the OECD Review of Swedish education in 2015 to empirically flesh out the argument. Although the influence of the OECD has been great to a number of countries, Sweden is perhaps one of the few that displays such unanimity of public opinion and the academic and policymaking worlds in regard to the indispensability of the OECD as an education policy expert and actor.

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## Introduction

Founded in 1961, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has become part and parcel of the internationalising, globalising and thus converging policy processes that have been commented on by many scholars in education (Ozga & Lingard, 2007; Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard, & Henry, 1997). While the OECD is primarily concerned with economic policy, education has taken on increasing importance within the OECD's mandate. Although its statistical competence in collecting education data has been developing since the 1960s, it was the success and influence of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) that gave the OECD unparalleled power in constructing new governing panoramas in education. PISA constructed an educational agenda that became significant in framing policy options not only at the national but also in the constitution of a transnational<sup>1</sup> policy space in education (Lingard & Grek, 2007; Lingard, Rawolle, & Taylor, 2005).

Therefore, the OECD instigated a new era in education governance, primarily through its construction of a commensurable transnational education space (Grek, 2009, 2010, 2014). Given the vast policy implications for systems worldwide, it is accepted that it is OECD's technical capacity to decontextualise and compare that became the primary force behind its success (Grek, 2009; Lingard & Grek, 2007; Martens, 2007). However, this paper does not intend to examine the full assemblage of the OECD education data production machine. Instead, it concentrates on OECD's *Reviews of National Policies for Education*, in an attempt to show how they lead to – and to a degree depend on – local policy interpretations and actors' socialisation. By 'socialisation' we mean the process of 'inducting actors into the norms and rules of a given community' that leads to 'sustained compliance based on the internalisation of these new norms' (Checkel, 2005, p. 804). The paper therefore argues that the OECD reviews are not simply a 'sideshow', executed in parallel to the main PISA 'protagonist'; rather, they have become indispensable tools in establishing the dominance of international statistical comparisons and in shaping the education policy debate. The paper will show that the OECD has become a key knowledge producer, mediator and teacher not only because of PISA, but also through a great amount of local, national and face-to-face work. It is precisely OECD's ability to work directly with member states that has allowed it to secure the brand of the unequivocal education policy player.

The paper begins with a brief discussion of some sensitising concepts, and in particular the notions of socialisation and learning. It then moves on to present a short history of the educational work of the OECD, with a particular focus on its *Reviews of National Policies for Education*. It discusses the case of Sweden and the recent publication of the country's education review by the OECD (OECD, 2015). It focuses primarily on how the Review led to the establishment of the Swedish School Commission (2015) as a key national body that would offer policy recommendations primarily on the basis of the OECD data (but, as we will see, not exclusively). The paper uses extensive interviews with key policy actors within and outside the Commission to discuss the role of the OECD as a key policy player in the Swedish education system over the last 10 years. Finally, the paper critically reviews the case in point and finishes off with some preliminary conclusions.

### ***Theoretical frame and key intermediary concepts: policy translation and socialisation***

In theoretical terms, adopting a perspective that builds on sociological institutionalism (Lowndes, 2010), international organisations (IOs) are understood as purposive actors who, 'armed with a notion of progress, an idea of how to create a better life, and some understanding of the conversion process', have become the 'missionaries of our time' (Barnett & Finnemore, 1999, p. 712). However, this does not in itself explain what has transformed the OECD to one of the most powerful agents of transnational education governance. Martens (2007) has contributed to this discussion suggesting that the 'comparative turn' – 'a scientific approach to political decision making' (2007, p. 42) – was the main driver of the OECD success. Through its statistics, reports and studies, it has achieved a brand which most regard indisputable. Despite a number of critical voices in the field (Brown, Micklewright, Schnepf, & Waldmann, 2007; Prais,

2003), OECD's 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 & Webb, 2004).

Hence, and despite all the commentary asking for contextualisation in their interpretation (e.g. Nóvoa and Yariv-Mashal 2003), indicators have become an accepted part of the contemporary educational policy lexicon across the globe. PISA has grown and multiplied: the OECD is now creating new PISA studies: PISA for Development and PISA for Schools (OECD, 2016a, 2017). Are we slowly entering the brave new world of *all things PISA*, a world of constant and relentless comparison? Indeed, as Nóvoa and Lawn 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).

Within this context of increasing and deepening academic analysis of the OECD numbers' influence, this paper wishes to offer an alternative interpretation of their success. Thus, it turns to the OECD's *Reviews of National Policies for Education*, in order to show that the assumption that the OECD has become powerful due to its ability to decontextualise and compare is only but half the truth. Although the significance of the technicisation of many – previously political – arguments in education cannot be disputed, the paper focuses on a less discussed yet important factor of the OECD success; this is the socialisation of policy actors within national contexts through processes of policy translation and contextual adaptation (Checkel, 2005). As suggested by Checkel (2005), processes of socialisation entail intensive communication, regular meetings, as well as the emergence of mutual trust and shared commitment between actors who are involved in the 'common project'. Socialisation leads to the construction of a common *esprit de corps*, defined by Meyer as the acceptance and internalisation of new norms: 'the right thing to do' (Meyer, 2005). This of course is not always an orderly, observable process. Instead it is a gradual, multilayered process that is predominantly governed by a *logic of appropriateness*, meaning the adoption of institutional rules and norms that 'regulate the use of authority and power and provide actors with resources, legitimacy, standards of evaluation, perceptions, identities and a sense of meaning' (Olsen, 1998, p. 96). As we will see in the following section, what we observe in Sweden is the making of an almost absolute and indisputable consensus on the role and significance of the OECD as key in reshaping the academic, policy and public debates. Observing and evidencing processes of international and national actors' socialisation as they take part in these institutional processes is considered an important intellectual tool in making sense of these new realities.

Second, in an attempt to illuminate *how* socialisation happens, the paper is utilising policy learning theory, and in particular Hugh Heclo's notion of *collective puzzlement* (1974), as well as Clarke et al.'s (2015) conceptualisation of how policy moves. Both sets of ideas help show how and why it is the coming together of various national and international actors that sustains and reinforces the numbers game, rather than solely the validity or strength of the numbers themselves. Over time (and the allowance of time is crucial here), international comparative assessments have created two crucial governing constructs: first, a common *language* using which diverse actors from the local, national and international 'levels' can communicate and second, a new governance system which in effect can be understood as 'an

incremental process reorienting the direction and shape of politics to the degree that (global) political and economic dynamics become part of the organisational logic of national politics and policy-making' (Ladrech, 1994, p. 69). However, rather than top-down, this is a mutually reinforcing process; Sweden was a key nation in establishing the work of international actors in education, like the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement and the OECD, and is very active in relation to European governance in education more generally (Grek & Lundahl, 2015).

In order to pre-empt critique, the paper does not claim that numbers are not important or that their spectacle through PISA's naming and shaming (Carvalho, 2012; Novoa & Yariv-Mashal, 2003; Simola, 2005) is not an indispensable part of OECD's success. Instead, we suggest that the spectacle has a temporal dimension; it surprises and shocks. Thus, spectacles quickly come and go (think of the embargoed results for example, and the media attention PISA receives). Nonetheless, what follows the announcement of the results requires steadfast, diligent and zealous face-to-face policy work in order to carry the numbers deeper into the national imaginary and entrench them into the system. The OECD sustains and builds its policy work through the continuous crafting of its relationship with key education actors in other IOs (Grek, 2014) and within national contexts.

But how can we define learning in policy terms? Dunlop and Radaelli define learning as an 'updating of beliefs':

In public policy, we are eminently concerned with beliefs about policies ... This process of updating beliefs can be the result of social interaction, appraisals of one's experience (often of failure) or evidence-based analysis – or most likely a mix of the three. (2013, p. 600)

Policy learning theory is certainly not new – from the seminal work of Dolowitz and Marsh on policy transfer (1996) and Haas' work on epistemic communities (1992), to the advocacy coalition framework (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993) and the examination of the EU as a learning organisation (Zito & Schout, 2009), the literature on policy learning has grown. The paper focuses on Hugh Heclo and his writings about governing as *collective puzzling*:

Politics finds its sources not only in power but also in uncertainty... Governments not only 'power'... they also puzzle. Policymaking is a form of collective puzzlement on society's behalf; it entails both deciding and not knowing .... (Heclo, 1974, pp. 305–6)

According to Heclo, more so than politicians, it is the work of civil servants that is crucial in the making of policy; they are bestowed a permanency politicians do not have, in addition to experience and institutional memory, since 'to officials has fallen the task of gathering, coding, storing and interpreting policy experience' (Heclo, 1974, p. 303). However, policy work usually happens through interaction; according to him, 'it is in interaction (that) these individuals acquire and produce changed patterns of collective action' (Heclo, 1974, p. 306).

More recently, Clarke and colleagues suggest that policy is never a finished product, to be observed and transferred in a linear manner (2015). Instead, they suggest that

When policy moves, it is always *translated*: that is, it is made to mean something in its new context. Policy is never a singular entity: it is put together – or assembled – from a variety

of elements that are always in the process of being re-assembled in new, often surprising ways. (Clarke et al., 2015, p. 1)<sup>2</sup>

Following both Checkel (2005) and Clarke et al. (2015), the claim of this paper is that the OECD education policy work of the last 20 years has achieved a paradigmatic shift in the thinking and framing of education not only thanks to the cold rationality of numbers but crucially through the interpretation and adaptation of its recommendations in myriad venues and opportunities where local, national and international actors interact.

Freeman sums up beautifully the impact of such iterative processes of collective learning:

This implies that learning is not simply an interpretative act, a process of registering and taking account of the world; it is, in a fundamental way, about creating the world. It is an active process of *making* sense (Weick, 1995). Similarly, just as we shop in order to discover what we want (and we might think of some kinds of political learning as ‘policy shopping’), we read in order to discover what we think, not just what any given author thinks (Brown & Duguid, 2000). What emerges is *a conception of learning as an act of imagination, invention and persuasion as much as (or as well as) comprehension, deduction and assimilation.* (2008, p. 15, my emphasis)

The article draws on research originating in the project ‘From Paris to PISA: governing education by comparison, 1867–2015’; it examines the role of the national in the emergence of a transnational education policy field, as exemplified in the making of the European and global education policy space. By focusing on Sweden, a country considered a leading education state for most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it aims to produce significant knowledge about the logics of comparison, its main actors and its techniques and effects. The present paper is based on interviews with key policy actors in Sweden that come from the Ministry and some of the main research agencies, teacher unions and universities that have been central to analysing PISA data and their implications for policy in the country.

### **The OECD’s *Reviews of National Policies for Education***

As the OECD itself suggests, the *Reviews of National Policies for Education* are most prominent among a range of activities that lead to analyses of education policy development and implementation in response to or anticipation of wider economic and social trends and developments (OECD, 2016b). According to the OECD, there is involvement of Ministries as well as professional groups, researchers and others in formulating and carrying out the work and in discussing the findings of the OECD review expert group that visits the country; thus, the circle of actors involved is wide (OECD, 2016b). The aim of the reviews is ‘to improve the understanding of issues, implications for education policies and experience with the range of national policy options and strategies’ (OECD, 2016b). Recent ‘National Policies’ include a high number of reviews from a diversity of countries, for example, The Netherlands, Latvia, South Africa, Dominican Republic, Russia, Scotland, Bulgaria, Korea, Ireland, Italy, Estonia, Lithuania, Kazakhstan, Chile and many others. Indeed, going back into

the OECD archives, it is difficult to identify countries that have never had an OECD review of their education system.

Education policy reviews proceed in several stages: initially, there is preparation and completion of a background report by the country's undergoing review, followed by a 2-week mission by an external team of reviewers. The external team then prepares and completes the review report. This is presented at a 1–1½ day review session at the OECD Education Committee, when the Minister (with input from senior staff) comments on recommendations and conclusions of the review team and responds to questions of other countries' delegates to the Education Committee (OECD, 2016b).

The report of the external review team, edited to take into account the main points raised in the review session, is then published. According to the OECD, their scope is usually very broad with the goal to provide recommendations on 'effective policy design and implementation'. Generally the analysis covers 'strengths and weaknesses which are primarily based on OECD's collected data (from studies such as PISA, or earlier OECD reviews), national research, review visits to the country and OECD's extended knowledge base' (OECD, 2016b). Finally, the programme of reviews consists of a follow-up. After a period of about 2 years, 'authorities of the country concerned submit a short note to the Education Committee in which they report on progress and developments. Discussion takes place as a regular item in the agenda at a bi-annual meeting of the Education Committee' (OECD, 2016b).

### ***'Improving schools in Sweden: an OECD perspective': the OECD country review of Sweden (2015) and the foundation of the Swedish school commission***

The Swedish OECD country review of 2015 was not the first one in the country; another one had preceded it in 2011 (Nusche, 2011). However, in light of the negative PISA 2012 results, as well as the general downward spiral of Swedish education performance, it quickly led the Ministry of Education and Research to commission the OECD for yet another report of the country's education system (OECD, 2015). The objectives of the review were to

- 1) identify the main reasons for the decreasing trends in Swedish students' performance; 2) draw on lessons from PISA and other benchmarking countries/regions with an expert analysis of key aspects of education policy in Sweden; and 3) highlight areas of policy and its implementation which might add further value to Sweden's efforts to improve student performance. (OECD, 2015, p. 13)

The process followed the usual pattern: a background report prepared by the Swedish government, an OECD pre-visit which defined the key areas for review, an OECD team review visit to Sweden in October 2014, as well as a series of other exchanges with experts and stakeholders in Sweden and internationally (OECD, 2015). The OECD report acknowledges the contribution of a number of actors within Sweden and in particularly the Ministry, such as all members of the OECD-Sweden Education Policy Review Steering Group (namely Annica Dahl, Anna Westerholm, Johan Lindell, Kerstin Hultgren, Merja Ströemberg, Anna Barklund, Peter Johansson and Annica Hellewell) (OECD, 2015). The two external experts in the team were Richard Elmore, Gregory R. Anrig, Research Professor of Educational Leadership, Harvard Graduate School of



Education, and Professor Graham Donaldson, the former Scottish HMI Chief Inspector and current President of the Standing International Conference of Inspectors – Donaldson was one of the chief architects of the self-evaluation model in Scotland. The expertise of both external evaluators (on leadership and accountability) is quite evident of where the focus of the review lay.

The OECD visit took place between 13 October 2014 and 22 October 2014 and involved a number of meetings with key actors such as the Ministry, the Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket), the Swedish Schools Inspectorate (Skolinspektionen), the two teacher unions (Läraryrket and Lärarnas Riksförbund), academics in education research and teacher education (Stockholms universitet and others), the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (*Sveriges Kommuner och Landsting*) and visits in different municipalities and local schools (OECD, 2015).

The report uses quite damning language to describe the state of Swedish education: ‘no other country ... saw a steeper decline’ (OECD, 2015, p. 7); ‘a school system in need of urgent change’ (OECD, 2015, p. 11); ‘a position significantly below the average’ (OECD, 2015, p. 27). A discursive analysis of the text reveals a language that describes a system in crisis. Although it would have been interesting to offer a detailed critical analysis of the report itself, the paper’s focus on actors and the learning that took place during and after the report’s publication is where we will now turn to. There is of course no disputing that it was precisely the negative results and the choice of language to describe them that sparked a lot of the reaction that followed its publication.

### ***Actors’ voices: an internal perspective of OECD review’s influence in Sweden***

Seven key actors were interviewed for this analysis. Their reflections on the process of how the Review was commissioned and its effects were enlightening. For some, the commissioning of the review was not a surprise; they described the influence of the OECD in shaping the public and policy debate in Sweden as having started much earlier – in effect, as soon as the first negative results were published. In the interviewees’ analysis of how the OECD PISA became dominant discourse, they all made similar points. As we will see later, there is unanimity in suggesting that the OECD became quickly the golden standard of education research in Sweden, at the expense largely of national education researchers who were seen as of lesser quality and relevance. Second, although they do not often use the term ‘crisis’, they all agree that PISA was a legitimate source of evidence of the declining quality of Swedish education, and thus the OECD was offering necessary recommendations for change. Interestingly, some of them referred to the OECD as becoming the single force for halting the wave of marketisation in the country; they described the OECD as being at ‘the left of almost all political parties’. This is extraordinary given OECD’s declared ideological standpoint, but evident also of the extent of marketisation in Sweden, as well as OECD’s strategy to always appear as the a-political voice of reason. Finally, they refer to the rise of the involvement of a wider variety of policy actors, from other fields, like economists or legal experts, who were seen as indispensable for legitimising and symbolic reasons; educational reform is too serious to be left to education itself.



Although they do not themselves use the term socialisation, all interviewees in their interpretation of the influence of PISA in Sweden offered a similar story of staggered events that followed one another; of the involvement of an ever wider set of actors; of the importance of the OECD experts in offering suggestions; and of the central role of the establishment of the Swedish School Commission as a forum of meeting, debate and learning for all the actors involved. Indeed, the title of report of the Commission, 'Samling för Skolan' (Gustafsson, 2017), denotes precisely the notion of 'congregation' or 'gathering' – the meeting and consensus of different actors around the core of the commission's study, which were the OECD numbers themselves. Numbers and data are central in the interviewees' narratives, but so are the meetings, the debates and the continuous coming together of actors in socialising and learning events.

In more detail, in their reflections, actors acknowledge themselves as equally key in utilising the OECD results to shift the policy direction:

So the OECD PISA report of 2006 was an opportunity to start to talk about things as a mistake, as something that needed to be organised differently. This is about the 2006 report that showed that we were not average anymore ... at the political level the discussion started 10 years ago -that's why the OECD was easily invited in 2014/5 to write this report .... When it became official that they wanted to invite the OECD to write the report I wrote an article where we were saying to rethink the idea, but it was ridiculed. That could mean that it was an opportunity that they were welcoming – in their opinion the OECD is very ... they are the experts and we are not. (Academic 1)

Interestingly, perhaps simultaneously with the rise of the OECD as the ultimate go-to education experts, we observe the slow decline of Swedish education research as valid and trustworthy enough to even take part in the PISA data collection process – instead, Andreas Schleicher acquires an almost divine quality that matches closely the religious adherence to PISA in Sweden:

What has happened, you can go back to 2003, TIMMS and PISA were at MidSweden university, now they are all run by the educational board (Skolverket). And they contract fewer and fewer education researchers for very little time to do some coding, to offer some comments. We were really independent from the government and at the time we were in a lot of the OECD meetings, we were involved. But now it is the educational board which does all that – and they don't have any researchers, they have project managers but they do not have researchers, they have government bureaucrats .... But when Andreas Schleicher is in Sweden it is like we have a visit from God, it is very strange. I think this is problematic. (Academic 2)

As a result, education researchers do not have an alternative voice in Sweden anymore – when they take part, the majority of them is to validate rather than dispute the PISA results:

Today no one can [criticise PISA] really. PISA has in some sense got so much status that I don't meet many who can say we can contrast PISA – but a lot of people say we need to discuss the implications of PISA. (Academic 2)

The Swedish debate is much less active than, for example, the Norwegian debate. I think the criticism is louder in other countries (Policymaker 3).

However,

Some of these recommendations are problematic – a lot of these things they are writing, a lot of secondary analysis is made by economists, statisticians not so much from the scientific community in education. (Academic 2)

Although the academic community appears to have lost its central position in informing policy, there appears to be a much more diverse and horizontal participation of different actors in policymaking, even if it involves a lot of ‘cherrypicking’. Here, speaking about how the OECD report was commissioned, an interviewee, who later became central to its analysis, suggests:

They have asked for it. Policy makers, Björklund was the one who contacted the OECD and asked for the analysis of the reason for the decline ... I think that it may be seen as well as giving up asking our national organisations but I don’t think it needs to be interpreted in that way. He asked also many Swedish organisations and persons, researchers, people in the professions for suggestions and listened to them very selectively of course and did a lot of cherry picking of what he liked to hear and what he didn’t like to hear – this is all what politicians do. But I think the OECD report was quite well received in Sweden; it is written by people in the OECD and parts of it which are reflected of a certain Ideology and policy but a big part of the report has been written by many researchers who are very proficient and very apt in doing this kind of research. I think that the suggestions they are making are seen by and large as making a good sense as providing a useful perspective. (Commission member 4)

What is important here are two developments that seemed to have dominated the Swedish education polycscape since 2000; the first one was the unequivocal rise of the OECD as the golden standard of education research in the country (with the simultaneous downgrading of national education researchers), and second, the rise and broadening up of a debate about a system that was portrayed as in crisis. This picture, given the history of Sweden as a model European education system throughout the twentieth century, in addition to the success of close neighbours, such as Finland, became symbolic of a marked shift in the need to socialise and ‘educate’ all relevant actors about the critical need for change. That process began slowly since the mid-2000s, but became cataclysmic after the damning PISA 2012 report. It was that one that became the primary reason for launching the Swedish School Commission:

It was a response to the OECD report. If I can give you a bit of the timeline: in December 2013 we have the PISA report, week after that there was a big debate at the parliament about the school crisis. There after Björklund invites the OECD to write the report, even before the report is released and they organised this school commission with Anna Ekström – now the chair is Jan – Eric Gustaffson. Their task was to study the report of the OECD in order to make a Swedish analysis, do we agree what is the to do list, but this commission has been criticised as being only in favour of this particular view that the PISA results are the only ones that show the truth about Swedish schools today. (Academic 1)

Indeed, the Swedish School Commission was launched by the Government in April 2015 and was headed by Anna Ekström, the ex-head of Skolverket and current Minister of Upper Secondary School and Adult Education and Training. ‘The task of the Commission was set out as follows: partly based on the OECD’s recommendations, the schools commission will submit proposals aimed at improving learning outcomes, teaching and equity in Swedish schools’<sup>3</sup> (Swedish Government, 2015). What is

interesting with the government's recommendation and what followed it is that the debate was very closely associated with the OECD data. The OECD and its recommendations were central to this debate and in many ways, framed it; this then instigated the work of the Commission that was purposefully staffed by a broad range of actors and that met regularly over 2 years in a process of learning, socialisation and translation of the OECD recommendations to national policy.

Yes, it is really an answer to the bad results of PISA 2012 – and I think it was a good response – not follow the OECD in their 'do that, do this' but take some time and think it over .... Because there is so much political tension about schooling in Sweden just now. You really, everyone identifies you pro or against the free schools etc. (Policymaker 5)

Indeed, it was precisely the slow uptake and translation of OECD's recommendations in the national context that created the consensus necessary around its central role. In terms of the Commission's composition:

It is composed of stakeholders in the field of education: heads of teachers unions, and the different responsible organisations, like the municipalities, the chair of the municipal board, and the independent schools and the Swedish employers organisation are represented and then there are researchers – there are no economists, they were quite upset about that. I am from the field of education, there is someone from special education and there is someone from financing of education but she is not really an economist, mostly an organisational researcher – so these are the 4 researchers. The idea is basically that the commission would represent the field – there are no politicians in the commission ... It is not a politically representative kind of group – there is just the professional perspectives. (Commission member 3)

According to a key ex-actor/member of the Commission:

It is an advisory board but on the other hand if it is unanimous I think it would have an impact because of its members – the commission is very broadly set up by persons with huge responsibilities in the education field and few people who are not directly connected with education but with a very high degree of public trust. So I would say that if they are unanimous and they come up with solutions that are possible, it will have an impact, it would be very strange if it didn't. (Policymaker 3)

The Swedish School Commission has been meeting regularly for the last 2 years. Its members are asked to look at evidence and draw conclusions about the direction of travel for Swedish education. Interviewees described these meetings as learning opportunities for all participants involved. They described the Commission as broadly reflecting the wider public and policy debate in Sweden and suggested that its priority is to take the time necessary to offer a 'Swedish solution', nonetheless following closely the OECD research and recommendations. Again, in their narratives, they never claim that the OECD data are not central; in fact, they are the spine that holds them all together. But they do also suggest that the national filtering process that is happening through their meetings is necessary for the interpretation, adaptation, persuasion and at the end adoption of the OECD perspective. Given the polarisation of the public debate however, as well as the urgent nature of the need for change as suggested by the OECD, this work is not easy and often involves the translation of OECD data through the use of national research:

We are still struggling with our programme of suggestions, we have a lot of ideas, we have priorities to make, we need to make choices ...

... The commission already published a half time report – this report it was published in May 2016, and we were quite happy to achieve consensus in that report – it identified the problems and set up an agenda for more concrete work. When we get down to the nitty gritty details, there are things that we realise that we are not altogether agreeing on – but this is part of the process and the dynamics of this work ...

... We have analysed the PISA reports carefully ... they produce some very important work and I myself found the latest reports to be extremely well researched in terms of the analysis and the quality of the data ... We use research evidence and we have lots and lots of input from the Swedish researchers and we have reports from the national agency who have been very productive. (Commission member 4)

### ***Socialisation and learning in governing: the case of the OECD country reviews***

The OECD Swedish country review of 2015 and the set-up of the Commission that followed it is an illuminating case of the kind of processes of socialisation of a diversity of actors that was discussed earlier on: in this case, the OECD was invited to enter a national system and combine its quantitative knowledge with a more qualitative perspective, gained from a 2-week fieldwork visit, discussions with local actors, as well as a detailed background report supplied by the government of the time. More cases would need to be investigated to explore the extent of the policy impact of these OECD national reviews – this was not possible here, nor was it intended. Instead, what this paper tried to achieve is to go beyond the scholarship on the influence and impact of OECD's governing by numbers, in order to look at the political work of some of its other policy tools.

The paper began this analysis by suggesting that the OECD has become a transnational education actor par excellence in the field of education – however, the reasons behind this global reach and influence are not always clear. Although the paper acknowledges that numbers' ability to move is of enormous significance for mastering 'governing at a distance', governing intersects with two other elements; these are the notions of *symbolic space* (Cooper, 1998). Space is crucial, because education, contrary to other sites of audit and accountability, takes places at a specific physical place, inhabited by bodies and contextualised locally: the school. This is important to keep in mind, since often the discussion about accountability, standards and performance management appears as relatively abstract and top-down, therefore missing out on an understanding of local translations and adaptations. The school, either as real or symbolic space, brings together a community of people.

This paper showed that, rather than simply offering what has been seen as fast policy solutions (Lewis & Hogan, 2016), through the country reviews, the OECD painstakingly enters national sites and works with local actors to create conditions of belonging; that is, it creates conditions fruitful for collective puzzlement, socialisation and policy translation as Heclo (1974) and Clarke et al. (2015) suggest. There could not have been a better example than the set-up of the Swedish School Commission with a remit to study the OECD report in detail and offer recommendations for reform. National actors are equally central in supporting and sustaining these processes. Indeed, some of

the interviewees, even when critical of the OECD work, were ready to acknowledge that the OECD sparked a debate that would not have happened otherwise. However, it is important to also note that the debate was not as wide-ranging and diverse as it appears: the PISA data and the OECD review of 2015 have always been at the centre of all analysis. In fact, what this paper showed is that progressively since the mid-2000s the OECD became an undisputed expert organisation and indeed, as couple of interviewees suggested, a ‘production force’. Close and sustained work with the Ministry, in combination with touching a nerve with the Swedish public (with quotes by Schleicher, such as ‘Swedish schools having lost their soul’<sup>4</sup>), was key ingredient of this success.

What is perhaps more interesting in policy analysis terms is the progressive layering and imbrication of a number of OECD events and experts who have been coming back and forth to Sweden for the last decade. The meetings and exchanges, as this paper showed clearly, go far beyond the limits of a small circle of elite policymakers and experts. The Swedish country review of 2015 sparked a debate that included not only policymakers but also academics, teachers and the media. In the case of the OECD and Sweden then, ironically perhaps, ‘governing at a distance’ (Cooper, 1998) appears to require a strange sense of proximity: arguably, these conditions of actors’ socialisation and policy translation are necessary for the kind of paradigmatic policy shift we witness in Sweden today.

## Conclusion

The Swedish case is perhaps only an example of wider shifts in education governance; more cases and critical analysis of OECD’s policy work are necessary. Through processes of collective puzzling and social learning, the OECD country reviews represent a new mode of regulation which draws on and supports the ‘data dream’ by providing it – at least in some systems – with what it lacked before: a sense of belonging and ‘ownership’ of the project. The paper is not contradicting the argument that ‘a specific international reasoning is included in national education policies and, as such, works in parallel with internal reforms and agendas’ as outlined recently by Pettersson et al. (2017, p. 15). What it suggests however is that much more attention needs to be placed on the processes through which international reform agendas enter national policy spaces and shape them through slow, continuous and consensual build-up of the new, common *esprit de corps* – the inescapable ‘right thing to do’ (Meyer, 2005). It is these processes of learning and socialisation that embed the international much deeper into the national consciousness, one often traumatised by the exposure that the damning OECD data may bring.

Education governance therefore has undergone changes that may be seen as emblematic of a paradigm shift not only in the regulation of education, but in regulation per se. The OECD country reviews are analytically interesting for the reason that regulation does not simply enter the walls of institutions through external environmental pressures, policies and politics; in the case of country reviews, international experts pay a *physical* visit, they carry a body and a name (often internationally renowned name) and walk through the door: they are women or men and carry a folder. More importantly, 2 weeks later, these OECD experts leave, and they leave to prepare a review. Their report is soon to be public information, to be debated, analysed and, in the unfortunate case of more ‘shocking’ PISA results, debated even further.

Crucially, as this paper showed, socialisation and the learning that it produces do not merely entail the learning of facts. It is *constitutive*, generating or strengthening trust, commitments, identifications and loyalties – it embodies, as Hunter has fittingly described, ‘the connective tissue of governing itself’ (Hunter quoted in Newman, 2012).

## Notes

1. Here we follow Djelic and Sahlin-Andersson’s preference of the term ‘transnational’ versus ‘global’ governance, since ‘the label “transnational” suggests entanglement and blurred boundaries to a degree that the term “global” could not’ (2006; 4 – for a more developed argument see also Hannerz, 1996).
2. The concepts of translation and assemblage have a strong footing in Science and Technology Studies (STS) and especially Actor-Network theory. Åm (2016) criticised Clarke et al. for their use of the concepts without referring explicitly to STS. Indeed, an institutional approach does not marry very well with STS’ use of the concept of translation; although it would have been an interesting discussion, it is not possible to achieve this here. Therefore, the paper uses the looser term ‘interpretation’ to evoke the change of meaning and adaptation Clarke et al. (2015) persuasively discuss.
3. For a detailed list of its members see here: <https://pasisahlberg.com/news/swedish-school-commission/>.
4. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/04/sweden-school-choice-education-decline-oecd>.

## In memoriam

I would like to devote the paper to the memory of the good friend and colleague Dr John Smith, Institute of Education, Dublin City University.

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