

Never Waste a Crisis: Understanding the Welsh Policy Response to PISA in the Context of the Globally Structured Reform Agenda

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ABSTRACT

This article considers the nature of the globally structured reform agenda including the role of international organisations and the development of new supra-national modes of governance. It discusses the impact of this agenda on education policy within national education systems with a particular focus on the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) as an example of the globally structured reform agenda. It explores the role PISA has in global educational governance and in influencing the transfer of policy between education systems. Policy responses to PISA are critically discussed with a particular focus on the response in Wales. It is argued that new supra-national modes of governance shape education systems and the transfer of policy between them, but that they are also used as a tool to further domestic political agendas in order to bring about reforms.

Key words: PISA, policy, globally structured reform agenda, Wales.

Introduction

This article was developed from an essay completed as part of my MSc in Education, Policy and Society at Cardiff University. Having worked in

<https://doi.org/10.16922/wje.19.1.11>

Welsh education policy and wider public policy for most of my career, the MSc has provided an opportunity to explore the links between policy and research and to improve my knowledge of the evidence base for the field I work within. This specific piece of work provides an example of how academic research can illuminate the processes involved in politics and policymaking. Undertaking it has provided me with a valuable opportunity to critically reflect on one of the major drivers for change in education in Wales in recent years: the response to the PISA ‘crisis’. This opportunity enabled me to place my experience of events I had followed closely in a professional capacity in the context of global patterns of education reform that shape the transfer of policy between education systems. The process has deepened my awareness of the supra-national factors that shape an education system and how they interact with political agency within that system. I feel it has enabled me to better understand how we have arrived at current education policy in Wales and has increased my awareness of external influences shaping Welsh education policy.

The globally structured reform agenda

Ball argues that neo-liberal reform has led to a new form of governance with complex relationships and interests governing policy, as states have reduced control over their education systems: ‘As soon as we take neo-liberalism seriously it becomes clear that education policy analysis can no longer be limited to within the boundaries of the nation state’ (Ball, 2012: 4). He considers contemporary trends in global education policy and identifies the emergence of ‘new forms of “network” governance’ or “heterarchies” that can make policy-making and governance more opaque and “diversify and dissociate” the spaces of policy’ (Ball, 2012: 1). They bring into play more authorities and organisations and more complex power relations involving interdependent organisations such as multilateral agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), businesses and inter-governmental organisations. As a result national governments, especially those of small and fragile states, are less able to steer their own education systems.

Dale and Robertson (2002: 10) explore how globalisation operates through regional transnational organisations and how those organisations affect education detailing how, whilst the purpose of these organisations is economic, there are also inevitable ‘wider assumptions and implications’

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that directly or indirectly impact on social infrastructure, including education. In the case of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), although its purpose is to shape global economic policy it has taken on an increasingly important global role with regard to education which has 'been reframed as central to economic competitiveness' (Grek, 2009: 24). Dale and Robertson (2002) also observe the transfer of national government functions to the transnational arena. Governments cede national power to supra-national organisations for the longer term 'national good', or at least the good of the national economy. Economic and trade organisations such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, OECD and the World Trade Organisation, occupy a dominant structural position in global economy (Dale and Robertson, 2002).

Pasi Sahlberg articulates the global education reform agenda as GERM (Global Education Reform Movement) and uses the analogy of a virus to describe its spread around the world (Sahlberg, 2012a). Neo-liberal market-based reforms have focused on standardisation, competition and accountability as the main tools of education improvement. This has led to increasing similarities between education systems as policies are 'borrowed' from other education systems (Sahlberg, 2012b).

Ball (2004) also argues that the global education reform agenda has led to the emergence of a global performative culture which he argues is eradicating professionalism in teaching. He describes performativity and managerialism as 'the ugly sisters of reform' (Ball, 2004: 7). Performativity and managerialism are 'ultimately reducible to exogenously generated, rule-following' and 'render professionalism into a form of performance, that what counts as professional practice rests upon meeting fixed, externally imposed judgements' (Ball, 2004: 5). As well as reforming organisations, these policy technologies are also reforming teaching practitioners by changing roles and relationships that subsequently change the professional identity of teachers. This has the effect of shifting the power over pedagogy and curricula and re-casting the role of teachers as 'pedagogic technicians' (Ball, 2004: 8).

Programme for International Student Assessment

PISA is a triennial international survey which 'aims to evaluate education systems worldwide by testing the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students' (OECD, n.d.). To date seventy different economies have participated

in PISA. Rather than being based on national curricula, PISA tests are designed to assess competencies and the application of knowledge to 'real-life' situations (OECD, n.d.). This enables PISA results to be used to compare the performance of different education systems. The international comparability of the results has helped lead to PISA's success and prominence with politicians, policymakers and the media (Grek, 2009).

Through PISA, the OECD has an indirect but significant influence on education systems and has risen rapidly to a position of strategic importance in the international education discourse (Meyer and Benavot, 2013; Grek, 2009). Unlike other international organisations the OECD does not have legal powers or financial levers to control policymaking, however through ranking exercises, policy reviews and PISA 'its educational agenda has become significant in framing policy options not only at the national but also in the constitution of a global policy space in education' (Grek, 2009: 24). Martens (2007, cited in Grek, 2009) suggests that the power of the OECD brand comes from the shift towards a more comparative and 'scientific' approach to policymaking, similar to the trend towards the performativity and managerialism culture described above (Ball, 2004).

It is clear that through PISA the OECD has actively helped to develop a field of global education policy through comparative educational performance measures (Grek, 2009). On the one hand this can be seen to facilitate evidence-based policymaking and promote educational improvement, for example by 'identifying what schools and educational leaders in high performing countries do in a different way from their lower-ranking peers' (Meyer and Benavot, 2013: 10). However, critics of PISA have also raised doubts about its reliability and validity as well as questioning its claim to cultural neutrality in which it uses the same tests to assess students from extremely diverse social, economic and cultural backgrounds (Meyer and Benavot, 2013). These critiques have been played out prominently in the press, for example, a number of high-profile academics have voiced concern about the extent of reforms being implemented in many countries for the purpose of improving PISA rankings (*The Guardian*, 2014). The ideological basis of PISA as a programme driven by the goal of increasing economic competitiveness and led by an organisation that is part of the neo-liberal reform agenda has also been criticised:

PISA seems well on its way to being institutionalised as the main engine of the global accountability juggernaut, which measures, classifies and ranks students, educators and school systems from diverse cultures and countries using the same

standardised benchmarks. The OECD, in turn, begins assuming a new institution-alised role as arbiter of global education governance, simultaneously acting as diagnostician, judge and policy adviser to the world's school systems. (Meyer and Benavot, 2013: 9–10)

Policy responses to PISA

One of PISA's stated goals is to enable policy learning through the creation of an internationally comparable evidence base (Wiseman, 2013). Countries have responded to the PISA results, which are published as a league table ranking education systems by their scores, in a range of different ways. Trends in comparative policy responses to PISA which have received the most attention are identified by Wiseman as 'improving teacher quality, developing accountability systems around standards, and creating opportunities for equitable education' (Wiseman, 2013: 313).

The most cited example of PISA success is Finland. It has consistently been at the top of the PISA tables, causing great international interest in the key characteristics of the Finnish education system as others seek to replicate its success. However this is somewhat paradoxical as Finland is largely uncharacteristic of the kind of system promoted by the OECD and that is a typical product of the global reform agenda (Meyer and Benavot, 2013). Sahlberg cites Finland as a counter-example to the neo-liberal reform agenda and a better basis for educational improvement than neo-liberal reforms such as standardisation, competition and accountability. Features of the Finnish system, which he argues have led to its success in international assessments, include the high status of the teaching profession and autonomy given to teachers, lack of standardised testing and high levels of equity (Sahlberg, 2012a).

Despite its success, the Finnish media gave relatively little coverage to the PISA results. In contrast the initial reaction in Germany to its PISA ranking was one of shock. Finding itself placed much lower down the table than expected, discussion of the results dominated the media and led to urgent reforms (Grek, 2009; Wiseman, 2013). Reforms included standardised measures of student competencies and large-scale testing of pupils. The result was a significant reform of the education system (Grek, 2009). Wiseman (2013) argues that the 'PISA shock' was a response to unmet expectations of the German public and of policymakers – the results did not meet their assumptions of the German education system's place on the world stage.

Wales has experienced its own version of ‘PISA shock’. Its position in the global PISA rankings has declined since it entered the assessments for the first time in 2006 (BBC, 2013). The 2009 results caused a high level of debate, controversy and media coverage, particularly highlighting Wales’ poor position relative to the rest of the UK (BBC, 2013). This led to a significant policy response from the then Education Minister. In a seminal speech to the Welsh education sector the minister stated that ‘PISA, I am afraid, is a wake-up call to a complacent system. There are no alibis and no excuses. It is evidence of systemic failure. But, as I always say, never waste a crisis’ (Andrews, 2011).

The Welsh education ‘crisis’ led to the introduction of a twenty-point action plan with a number of major reforms. The focus of the plan was on raising standards through increased measurement of performance and data collection. A school standards unit was established within Welsh Government to lead the reforms which included the introduction of a national literacy and numeracy framework and national testing; Master’s level training for all newly qualified teachers; grading of schools into bands and; reconfiguration of local authority education services into regional consortia (Andrews, 2011). This politically prominent drive for reform was explicitly targeted at improving Wales’s place in the PISA rankings aiming for a place in the top twenty (a target that has since been revised to aim for a specific PISA score). However, Wales slipped further down the PISA rankings in the 2012 tests providing ‘a serious blow to the Welsh Government’s aspirations’ (Evans, 2015).

Wales’s new qualifications framework is being developed to be better aligned to international comparators such as PISA, and Estyn have amended their inspection process to take account of this and expect to see alignment of teaching to the skills needed for success in PISA (Evans, 2015). *Successful Futures*, the Welsh Government commissioned independent review of curriculum and assessment arrangements in Wales, recognised that relative performance internationally is a key driver of reform: ‘The disappointing performance of Wales in successive PISA surveys has been and remains a significant driver for change’ (Donaldson, 2015: 10). The review calls for a ‘forward-looking’ curriculum for a changing world, with a focus on real-world application and preparedness for the labour market, and an emphasis on cross-curriculum competencies in literacy, numeracy and digital literacy (Donaldson, 2015).

This response shows how Wales has prioritised the improvement of its PISA ranking and used this goal to make substantial policy changes. The

Welsh Government has shown that it sees PISA as a major policy driver rather than simply a tool for measuring performance: ‘There is already evidence that some countries – such as Wales, which has gone through its own “PISA shock” – are starting to tailor their education systems specifically to improve their PISA rankings’ (Raffe, 2011).

Discussion

Alexander (2012) argues that *how* policymakers learn from other education systems and translate that into policy is of vital importance. The belief that copying other countries that are successful in international assessments will lead to educational improvement and in turn increased economic competitiveness is hard for politicians and policymakers to resist (Alexander, 2012). However, it is important to differentiate between ‘policy borrowing’ and ‘policy learning’ (Raffe, 2011). A policy-borrowing approach searches for international examples of ‘best practice’ to transfer back to the home education system. It works on the assumption that the policies in question will produce improvements in any education system regardless of context. A policy-learning approach by contrast is a broader concept that uses international examples to better understand one’s own education system, its history and the policy options available, and to develop tailored national policies (Raffe, 2011). Policy learning takes account of culture and recognises that a national education system cannot be understood properly outside its context (Alexander, 2012).

The global PISA rankings are used by policymakers to judge the effectiveness of a country’s education system. However, the simplicity of the measures do not take account of contextual ‘out-of-school factors’ which may be significant and therefore mean that good PISA performance cannot necessarily be attributed to a good education system/good schools, and poor PISA performance cannot be attributed to a poor education system (Meyer and Benavot, 2013).

Selective use of evidence to inform policymaking serves to confirm and reproduce one’s own worldview (Alexander, 2012). PISA results are often used to justify reform or provide support for the existing policy direction. They provide a means to legitimate policy reform or to diffuse debate by referring to a ‘robust’ evidence base (Grek, 2009). This goes some way to understanding the variation of responses observed from shock to more relaxed responses (Wiseman, 2013). Some countries’ responses can be

described as ‘externalisation’, which is when policymakers refer to the external global situation in order to ‘make the case for education reforms at home that would otherwise be contested’ (Luhmann, cited in Grek 2009: 35). The Welsh response to PISA described above could be seen as an example of this: PISA was used as a political tool to provide a means to justify domestic policy, with the minister himself stating ‘never waste a crisis’ (Andrews, 2011).

PISA is ‘advancing a new mode of education governance in which state sovereignty over educational matters is replaced by the influence of large-scale international organisations’ (Meyer and Benavot, 2013: 10). However, within the globally shaped framework there is also a ‘remarkable degree of agency’ at national and local level about participation in and responses to PISA (Wiseman, 2013: 317). PISA is shaping the way European policymakers and networks operate and the issues they focus on (Grek, 2009). The OECD via PISA is operating as a form of ‘network governance’ (Ball, 2012: 6). Wiseman (2013) describes PISA as a political tool used by policymakers for gaining and exercising soft power, and Grek suggests that the audit and performance monitoring agenda of which PISA is a part has helped to ‘construct a global education policy field through *governance by comparison*’ (Grek, 2009: 3).

As demonstrated in the examples above PISA has been a key part of the governance of education networks in Europe, shaping national and supra-national policy agendas: ‘What began as an attempt at objective assessment is starting to become an active agent for change in the same school systems it is trying to measure’ (Stewart, 2013). A major element of this has been comparative policy development based on learning or borrowing from other education systems that have performed well in international assessments (Grek, 2009). For example, ‘educational tourists’ have flocked to Finland from all over the world in an attempt to understand the nature of its success (Stewart, 2013).

Conclusion

The globally structured reform agenda is based on a neo-liberal ideology which values policies and approaches such as performance management, standardisation, competition and accountability through assessment. This agenda has led to the emergence of new forms of governance that go beyond national boundaries and operate at a supra-national level, giving an

increasingly important role to international organisations such as the OECD. PISA is a prominent example of the globally structured reform agenda and of new modes of governance in action, shaping education policy within systems and the transfer of policy between systems, through internationally comparable performance measures.

Importantly, there is little divergence in the acceptance of the purposes and validity of PISA or questioning of the globally structured reform agenda that drives it. There is, however, variation in the way this agenda is implemented. The case of Wales discussed above illustrates how PISA and the targeting of improved PISA results has become a policy driver for many countries, and influences the transfer of policy between systems as they seek to emulate the best performing countries. It also shows how PISA's strong brand and credibility as a robust, comparable data source mean it is often used as a political tool to justify certain policy decisions and bring about educational reform.

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