

Transnational Governance: The Case of the OECD PISA

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Introduction

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) launched its first international student achievement test in 2000. Since then, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) has become one of the OECD's most successful and visible programs. Designed by OECD member-states to assess the reading, mathematics and science literacy and problem solving abilities of fifteen year olds, PISA attempts to measure how well students are prepared to meet the "challenges of today's knowledge societies" (OECD 2001: 14). Most importantly, the PISA results are perceived to be high quality, reliable, valid, legitimate and relevant (Morgan, 2007: 224). This case study examines how the PISA, as an instrument of transnational governance, came to be created, and through selective examples, its effects on Canadian educational governance.

Transnational governance is a term used to describe the context in which governments make policy. Governance from this vantage point is "an increasingly dense web of transnational networks, operating at different scales" (Mahon and MacBride, 2009: 3). Within these transnational networks, international organizations, like the OECD play a significant role in transmitting and constructing knowledge (see, for example, Noaksson and Jacobsson, 2003; Porter and Webb, 2008; Sahlin-Andersson, 2000).

Because the OECD's recommendations and ideas are non-binding for its member states, it has developed alternative processes, instruments and tools for transmitting and instilling policy ideas and expert advice. These soft modes of regulation are mechanisms for transnational regulation (Djelic and Sahlin-Andersson, 2006) encompassing the production and dissemination of knowledge, the publication of comparative data such as educational and social indicators, and peer reviews involving country and thematic reviews (Mahon and McBride, 2008; Noaksson and Jacobsson, 2003). Such methods and instruments aim at nudging member states into compliance. They can be quite effective when member states are 'shamed' into complying with OECD policies (Armingeon, 2004).

As Cox points out, different forms of state facilitate the relationship that exists between the global and the local with countries occupying different positions in the global system (2005:145). The 'reach' of international

organizations that are nodes within the global system varies from state to state and depends on the degree to which agents of the state “become a transmission belt from the global to the national economy” (ibid). To understand how ideas circulate between the national and the transnational, I follow Graefe’s suggestion and consider these ideas as “resources that different domestic social actors can draw on for expertise or legitimacy in the course of contests for power within their polity” (2006: 202).

By studying the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), one is able to discern a policy-making process described by Offe as the “scientization of politics” involving the “authoritative participation of scientific experts” (113). From the vantage point of the scientific or technical expert, the PISA becomes an important diagnostic tool for promoting convergence to a best practice in education policy and programming (Arrowsmith et al, 2004: 316). As Offe points out, the scientific-technical approach to policy making “unburden[s] the system of political decision-making” (113). However, these policy choices are inherently political as well as “value-laden and interest-laden” reflecting the unequal power relations that exist in educational decision-making processes (Jackson 2009, 186).

The case study points to a series of events that led to the eventual creation of the PISA. These events involved collaboration and knowledge-sharing among actors in the domestic and international arenas and within epistemic communities. The building of these knowledge networks allowed for the circulation of ideas across scales. In order for the PISA to reach into the domestic sphere, it required the active implementation by various agents at different levels of governance. These agents contributed to the knowledge construction that was taking place at the OECD while at the same time acting as transmission belts by tapping into the resources that were available to them. Ideas about how schools should be run were being transmitted from the domestic sphere to the international and then back to the domestic sphere setting in motion a “boomerang pattern of influence” identified in transnational networks (Kekk and Sikkink, 1999: 93-94; also see Noaksson and Jacobsson, 2003: 57). Resources circulated across scales so as to legitimate and bolster legitimacy for educational reforms.

The case study supports a Mahon and McBride hypothesis that “OECD policy advice appears to be most extensive in member states that were already aligned with the basic direction of OECD advice” (2008: 280). Canada has in the past conformed to OECD advice. For example, Jackson shows how through two-way policy discussions between the OECD and Canadian government officials, OECD ideas influenced Canadian economic and labour market policy (2008). In the case of the PISA, agents such as the federal government, the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) and provincial Ministries of Education not only facilitate the transfer of OECD ideas, they are actively involved in contributing to their reproduction.

The Rise of Education Policy at the OECD

Even though the OECD has been involved in developing education policy ideas since the post-World War II era, it was not until the mid-1990s that education policies came to be viewed as central to its overall mission (Rubenson, 2008: 242). The importance of education to OECD's work was affirmed with the creation of the Directorate for Education in 2002 (Morgan, 2007; Rubenson, 2008).¹ The Directorate for Education has two core programs, the Education Policy Committee and the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, which are funded by the OECD's base budget. It also has several activities and projects that are partly or fully funded under Part II program funding and to which participating member states contribute. The "highly visible and influential" Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is one such Part II program that is funded by member state contributions (Morgan, 2007; Rubenson, 2008: 243).

One can attribute the rise of education policy at the OECD to several factors. The first is the renewed attention to human capital theory as the guiding theoretical framework to labour market and economic policy. According to this theory, improving the quality of the labour force requires investments in human capital. The focus is on the supply side of human capital theory that aims at equipping workers and future workers with the necessary knowledge and skills to compete in the knowledge based economy (McBride, 2000: 161). In this theoretical framework, education is closely aligned with economic growth (Rubenson, 2008). Education is viewed in instrumental terms as serving the human capital needs of a global capitalist economy. As Huws explains, in the knowledge-based economy, the capitalist mode of production requires a labour force which possesses computer-literate and information-literate skills – in essence, a 'skilled' reserve army of labour (2006).

The second factor contributing to the rise of education at the OECD is the emergence of new ideas on educational governance in the 80s in member-states. Neoliberal educational policies encompassing competitive accountability, performance measures, educational quality, standardized testing, and parental choice were put into place in the United Kingdom, the United States and New Zealand (Levin and Young 2000). Similar reforms were introduced by several Canadian provincial governments in the 1990s such as the Klein government in Alberta and the Harris government in Ontario with varying degrees of success (Wallner, 2008). Such neoliberal educational reforms aimed at creating a competitive environment for schools in which results were measured based on outcomes of student performance on large scale student assessments (Morgan, 2006: 131).

A third factor that contributed to the prominence of education at the OECD was due to American influence. The American delegates "pressed, powerfully and persistently" the OECD to focus its research efforts on the quality of

education (Papadopoulos 1994:181) and on the development of international educational indicators (Heyneman 1993:375). With the publication of the report by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk: the Imperative for Educational Reform*, there was widespread belief that the American educational system was in crisis and that American students were under-performing internationally. The U.S. Department of Education was under pressure to provide accurate comparative educational indicators. Departmental officials looked to the OECD as a venue for the development of these indicators.

The Department of Education wanted to create the conditions inside the OECD for the capacity to evaluate and measure educational outcomes (Morgan, 2007: 122). As a result, the International Indicators and Evaluation of Educational Systems (INES) Project was created which brought together educational researchers who work inside government agencies, universities and research centres. The two key founders of the INES Project, the OECD and the U.S. National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), developed a plan for the collection of indicators through a progressive series of phases culminating with their publication (ibid). In 1992, the first *Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators* was published. *Education at a Glance* has been a huge success for the OECD and led to the mainstreaming of OECD's indicators work in education (Henry et al, 2001: 89).

Paralleling these developments, there was a growing interest in the linkages between adult literacy skills and human capital formation which resulted in the implementation of the first International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) in 1994 (Morgan, 2007, Chapter 6). Statistics Canada was a major actor in the IALS and contributed to the knowledge construction process. The IALS created a new technique for quantifying human capital. Instead of relying on educational attainment as a measure for human capital formation, workers could be directly assessed for their levels of functional literacy (Morgan, 2007:138). This technique would be later adopted by the PISA approach to assessing student literacy skills.

The final factor that contributed to the prominence of education policy at the OECD was the creation of the PISA. Not only had the OECD replaced UNESCO as the leader in education policy (Rubenson, 2008), it was soon to replace the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) as the leader in international student assessments (Morgan, 2007).² In June 1995, at the Third General Assembly in Lahti, Finland, a new data strategy for collecting indicators on student outcomes was presented to the delegates. *A Strategy for Producing Student Achievement on a Regular Basis*, known as the 'Data Strategy', integrated the foundational elements for an OECD international student assessment (Morgan, 2007: 129).

The PISA – a Soft Mode of Regulation

PISA, as a soft mode of regulation, is an instrument that assesses student achievement. The PISA results are reported using various methods: the OECD publishes the results in several reports; member-states produce their respective reports on the PISA results; and, the results receive much publicity in the media. PISA can serve as a regulatory tool because when results are below the OECD average, participating countries may be ‘shamed’ into instituting educational reforms. Once these reforms are in place, the next round of PISA will determine whether such reforms were effective. In this way, the PISA results become benchmarks. Those countries that do extremely well on the PISA are studied as models of ‘best practice.’ Countries or jurisdictions that do poorly may feel pressured to reform their educational systems.

PISA results are also used to inform analysis of various reports published by the OECD Directorate for Education and Economics Department. Whereas the Directorate for Education analyzes PISA results for the purpose of pointing out best practices in education, for example, equity issues in education, the Economics Department draws on PISA data to inform country reviews of educational systems. The Economics Department recommends specific educational reforms be made. In contrast, the Directorate for Education avoids making such recommendations. Its focus is on providing evidence that may point to the success of these reforms or recommendations.

As noted earlier, the PISA was initially conceived as a ‘Data Strategy’ by the group that developed educational indicators for the OECD. The underlying objective that unified OECD member states in pursuing the Data Strategy was to be able to reliably measure the international competitiveness potential of their labour force in a knowledge based economy. American delegates were influential in pushing for the creation of a new assessment. One of the reasons was a growing interest by the Clinton Administration in ensuring youth were equipped with the right skills for the world of work (Morgan, 2007). Another was growing concern over the poor management of an American-funded international student assessment administered by the IEA – the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (ibid).³

The first PISA was administered in 2000 and subsequent assessments have taken place triennially. 43 states (both OECD and non-OECD member-states) participated in the PISA 2000. Nine years later, 67 states are participating in the PISA 2009 – in fact in May students all over the world are taking the PISA.

Table 1: Participation in the PISA

PISA	# Countries Participating	# of Students Participating	Major Domain
2000	43	315,000	Reading
2003	41	+250,000	Mathematics
2006	57	400,000	Science
2009	67	+400,000	Reading

Constructing the PISA – the Role of Epistemic Communities

In the late 1990s, there was a growing presence of epistemic communities in the area of international student assessments that the OECD could tap into for the development of the PISA instrument. The presence of experts in educational measurement had grown as countries increasingly turned to large-scale assessments to measure student outcomes.

At the international level, the IEA’s various assessments in reading, science, mathematics and other areas had fostered the growth of transnational networks of educational measurement experts. The OECD did not have the expertise in this area. This knowledge was to be acquired through a tendering process which the OECD launched in October 1997. The OECD received three proposals in response to the call for tenders: one from the University of Bourgogne, a second from the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) consortium and a third from the IEA consortium (in which the Statistics Canada was a member). ACER ended up being awarded the contract for the PISA (Morgan, 2007).

The ACER consortium came to be known as the International Consortium. In consultation with the OECD and OECD member-states, a group of subject matter and technical experts was selected to construct the PISA instrument. Canadians who had worked on the International Adult Literacy Survey and on IEA assessments were among those experts selected for their technical and subject matter expertise. OECD member-states were not interested in assessing student learning according to curricular content. They wanted to find out if students had the literacy skills to compete in the knowledge based economy. In fact, the PISA creators were advocating for a “different outcome of the curriculum” but they were “not saying here is what you have to teach” (Interview Respondent #21, 25 October 2006).

The assessment framework developed for the PISA quantified the literacy of the knowledge worker in terms of three domains: reading literacy, mathematics literacy and scientific literacy. In the first PISA, the main area of testing was reading literacy with mathematics and science as the minor domains. In PISA 2003, the major domain was mathematics literacy with reading and science as the minor domains. Problem solving was added as another domain to be tested. In PISA 2006, the major domain was science literacy with mathematics and

readings as the minor domains. In the PISA that is being administered in May 2009, the major domain is once again reading literacy.

The construction of the PISA took place among an elite group of technical experts. However, final decisions were being made by policymakers on the PISA Governing Board. The process of creating the PISA excluded key actors who are intimately involved in educational matters – teachers, parents and students. The PISA instrument, as in the case of most large-scale assessments of student learning, is divorced from the reality of the classroom and the context in which schools do their work (Corbett, 2006: 69).

The PISA in the Canadian Context

The PISA serves as a useful resource to regulate behavior because of its inquisitive nature. In a federation such as Canada where the federal government has little control over compulsory education, the PISA becomes a tool for ensuring priorities are met. In 2000, when the PISA was first launched, Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) identified “promoting of learning and skills development” as one of its five strategic priorities (HRDC, 2000a: 28). It cited results from the International Adult Literacy Survey that pointed to low levels of literacy among adults and youth – “48% of adult Canadians lack the required literacy skills for the knowledge based economy” and “37% of youth are not meeting the standards for an entry level position” (HRDC, 2000a: 33). From this vantage point, the PISA results assist federal officials in monitoring and tracking progress towards improving the literacy skills of Canadian youth.

Another HRDC priority was the effective transition of students from school into the labour market. In 2000, HRDC in collaboration with Statistics Canada and the Council of Minister of Education, Canada launched the Youth in Transition Survey (YITS). As stated by HRDC’s Project Overview, YITS will serve as an “important instrument for research on the cost and benefits of initial education for individuals and society at large and the diversity of pathways followed” (HRDC 2000b: 10). Initial planning for this longitudinal survey began in 1996 and included a series of consultations and the collection of background information. School effects and student achievement levels were two of several factors identified as having an impact on school-to-work transitions. The survey therefore used the same 15-year old cohort as the one used for the PISA. In this manner, the survey was able to integrate PISA results into its findings. Cycle 1 of YITS was thus integrated with the PISA (HRDC 2000b).

For the provinces, represented by the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC), PISA results are a measure of how well provincial educational systems are performing – both in comparison to other provinces and to other industrialized countries. Provinces such as Alberta, British Columbia and Ontario have participated in international student assessments administered by the IEA. These include the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). However,

provincial Ministries of Education funded involvement in these assessments. In the case of the PISA, the federal government undertook the financial responsibility for funding the assessment.

From CMEC's perspective, PISA results are another resource for measuring curricular and student outcomes. CMEC has been moving towards harmonizing curricular goals since 1993. It has put in place national achievement tests and developed pan-Canadian indicators of education performance. The Ministers of Education signed into agreement the Pan-Canadian Protocol for Collaboration on School Curriculum. Areas of collaboration included the identification of curriculum outcomes and standards and the assessment of student performance. In 1997, a Common Framework of Science Learning was put into effect under this protocol (CMEC, 1997).

In summary, when the PISA was launched in 2000, both HRDC and CMEC stood to gain from their involvement in this international assessment. For the federal government, the PISA was a tool for assisting it in meeting its priorities for promoting skills development in Canada and for supporting Canadian youth in their transition from school to work. For CMEC, the PISA offered it a cost-effective yardstick for measuring the performance of provincial educational systems. More specifically, CMEC was moving towards harmonizing curricular goals and the PISA provided it with an appropriate resource to measure progress towards attaining a pan-Canadian curricular framework.

PISA and Canadian Student Achievement Testing

Today, both Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) and CMEC participate on the PISA Governing Board, the decision-making body of the PISA whose members are selected by their respective ministries of education. Only OECD member-states can vote on the Board whereas non-OECD member-states have observer status. HRSDC and CMEC are jointly involved in the decision making process at the international level. The interests of both actors are addressed by the PISA: for the federal government, a mechanism is in place to monitor how well schools are doing across Canada and their level of preparedness for the world of work; for the provinces, it is a tool that measures the effectiveness of their compulsory education systems.

To understand why the PISA has become important in governing education in Canada, one has to examine the current system for testing student outcomes. Within Canada, large-scale assessments take place at three different levels of governance – provincial, national and international. Provincially, student testing is in place in all the provinces. Among the territories, Yukon has moved towards instituting student assessments. The *Nunavut Education Act* includes a provision for establishing and maintaining Nunavut-wide assessments. The justification for these student assessments is to measure progress towards specific learning outcomes. However, as teachers' unions have pointed out, these assessments narrow the focus of the curriculum. Teachers have resisted

the movement towards standardized testing precisely because it deprofessionalizes teaching as a profession. Standardized testing takes away from the teachers their capacity to professionally assess student learning in the classroom (Corbett 2006: 59).

Nationally, CMEC developed the School Achievement Indicators Program (SAIP) which was in place from 1993-2004. This assessment was administered to 13 and 16 year old students across Canada to test their reading, mathematics and science levels of achievement. In 2007, SAIP was replaced with the Pan-Canadian Assessment Program (PCAP).

PCAP is administered to only 13 year olds, 2 years before they are destined to take the PISA. As with the PISA, the PCAP tests student learning in reading, science and mathematics. It focuses on one major domain every three years. Reading was the major domain for the first PCAP, which took place in 2007. In 2009, Canadian students taking the PISA will also be tested in reading literacy as their major domain. PCAP converges with the PISA and appears to be assessing similar content as the PISA.

Table 2 Prospective PCAP administrations

Actual or proposed date	Spring 2007	Spring 2010	Spring 2013
Major domain	Reading	Mathematics	Science
Minor domain	Mathematics	Science	Reading
Minor domain	Science	Reading	Mathematics

Table 3 Prospective PISA administrations

Actual or proposed date	Spring 2009	Spring 2012	Spring 2015
Major domain	Reading	Mathematics	Science
Minor domain	Mathematics	Science	Reading
Minor domain	Science	Reading	Mathematics

At the international level, all the provinces participate in the PISA. As noted earlier, several provinces participate in other international assessments such as TIMSS and PIRLS.

Table 4 – Participation in PISA 2006 – Canadian provinces

Provinces	# of Schools	# of Students
Alberta	87	1,984
British Columbia	73	1,884
Manitoba	84	1,990
New Brunswick	67	2,443
Newfoundland and Labrador	75	1,741
Nova Scotia	86	2,114
Ontario	120	2,928
Prince Edward Island	26	1,573
Québec	159	3,695
Saskatchewan	83	1,851
Total	860	22,203

Source: HRSDC, Statistics Canada and CMEC. 2007. Measuring up: Canadian Results of the OECD PISA Study. Ottawa: Statistics Canada, Table A.1.

Given that Canadian students participate in several assessments, this could lead to conflicting results. Statistics Canada has developed technical procedures to help link provincial assessments to national and international ones (Cartwright et al, 2003). In order to make such linkages, assessments need to be testing the “same skill or content area” (ibid: 15). As the authors note:

If two tests measure different domains of reading or if they measure the same domains differently, then students are likely to exhibit different proficiency patterns on the tests; in these cases scores on one test will not provide accurate estimates of scores on the second test (Cartwright et al, 2003: 15)

If the assessments are evaluating the same content and measuring the content domain in similar ways, then one can conclude that they are measuring the same student outcomes. If provincial, national, and international assessments are measuring similar student outcomes then one can safely assume that they reflect similar curricular goals and standards.

The authors of the Statistics Canada report (Cartwright et al, 2003) point to the merits of making linkages among different assessments. Provinces would find such linkages beneficial because they can integrate international benchmarks as part of their own provincial reporting.

Establishing linkages between provincial and international tests holds the promise of improving the richness and cost-effectiveness of provincial assessment programs by making it possible to incorporate international benchmarks in routine provincial assessment reports (Cartwright et al, 2003: 7).

The Atlantic provinces did not perform as well as the other Canadian provinces on international assessments. New Brunswick has put in place benchmarks to become one of the top three provinces in the country in its performance on national and international assessments by 2013. In its report on achieving benchmarks, New Brunswick measures its performance against its ranking on international assessments (New Brunswick Department of Education, 2007: 20). In the 2006 PISA, Alberta, British Columbia and Ontario ranked as the top three performing provinces. In fact, all Canadian provinces performed relatively well on the PISA with Canadian students ranking above the OECD average. Furthermore, Canada demonstrates a lower equity gap between schools compared with other OECD countries (Robertson, 2005: 55).

However, standardized testing in reading, mathematics and science cannot capture the complexity of learning and teaching processes. These types of assessments of learning represent a fraction of what is taking place in the classroom (Robertson, 2005: 55). Critiques of the educational system and ideas for its improvement have to come from teachers, parents and students. Rather than sidelining teachers, educational bureaucracies need to involve teachers and their unions in the evaluation of school systems.

Other models exist that can be examined and applied in the Canadian context. For example, in Finland, which ranked first on the PISA, the teaching profession is “highly esteemed” (Sarjala, 2005: 106). Teachers must have a Masters’ degree as part of their qualification requirements. In addition, Finnish teachers are “vested with considerable degree of decision-making authority concerning school policy and management” (ibid: 103) In Finland, there has been a movement towards a decentralization of school curricula, allowing for the development of curricular guidelines that are “sensitive to local contexts” (ibid: 105).

In summary, it appears that the movement towards standardized testing in Canada has become firmly entrenched in educational bureaucracies. Standardized testing reflects the predominance of the scientific and technical approach to governing education that narrowly defines educational objectives in terms of learning outcomes. The results of the PISA inform other types of standardized test administered provincially and nationally. As these assessments converge in content and in the skills they seek to measure, they reinforce specific educational agendas that are aimed at creating a globally skilled workforce for the knowledge based economy.

Conclusion

In this paper, I argued that the PISA, as an instrument of transnational governance, is a valuable resource that helps legitimate educational reforms as well as silence resistance to such reforms. The PISA is used as a resource for reinforcing a scientific and technical approach to addressing educational

problems. The results produced by the assessment become a benchmark for assessing the effectiveness of Canadian educational policies. Except for teachers' unions that resisted the accountability framework that was being applied to governing schools, outcome based education was rarely challenged. The PISA was deployed as a tool to assist in the harmonization of achievement testing across levels of governance – provincial, national and international. These policy effects may result in the creation of a standardized 'national' curriculum since the provinces have adopted similar yardsticks to evaluate student knowledge.

As the PISA case study demonstrates, scientific and technical knowledge and research in the form of standardized student testing have grown to inform education policy in Canada. This 'scientization of politics' has replaced genuine public debates on the types of educational reforms that are suited for local communities. To reclaim education as a complex process that is not restricted to a series of learning outcomes, an open discussion and critique of the present system must take place. In this manner, "a truly democratic and connected vision of schooling can emerge as ordinary people in ordinary places dream about what their children ought to do in school" (Nova Scotia Teachers Union 2004: iv).

¹ Prior to 2002, this policy area was subsumed within the Directorate for Education, Employment, Labour and Social Affairs.

² Deacon and Kaasch note the OECD has attempted "to take on the role of an international health organization, at least for its member states." The OECD is learning from the shortcomings of the WHO [World Health Organization] (2008: 238). My dissertation research on the PISA reveals a similar attempt by the OECD to take on the role of international educational organization for its member states and also for non-member states (Morgan, 2007).

³ This international assessment is today known as Trends International Mathematics and Science Study or TIMSS. Another assessment administered by the IEA is the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study.

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