

# The reception of PISA in France: a cognitive approach of institutional debate (2001-2008)

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**ABSTRACT:**

On the basis of qualitative methods of research, this paper analyses the reception of the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment in the French national and institutional policy debate between 2001 and 2008. Relying on a former and deeper research made for the *Know&Pol* project; it adopts a cognitive perspective and focuses on the circulation in the policy debate of the *argumentaires* — i.e. the different sets of arguments that aid in explaining to the public the main results achieved by French students in the PISA tests — initiated by the two main collective actors whose institutional position and competencies enable a deeper analysis of the French PISA results: the “bias *argumentaire*” from the staff of the education ministry and its close partners and the “ideal governance *argumentaire*” from the OECD's members. It shows that these two *argumentaires*, more or less faithful to the content of the survey, experienced contradictory tendencies on the period, at the expense of the first one. It thus questions how the PISA results are permanently translated in the public debate and how a common and politically legitimate knowledge on the functioning of the French education system is built.

**KEYWORDS:**

PISA, Circulation of knowledge, Education policy, Translation.

Since its creation, the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and precisely its effects on national education policy processes were widely commented around the world, but rarely analysed in a scientific perspective. France does not depart from this rule. Some researches put forward the PISA effects on education sciences and especially on the evolution of comparative education (Malet, 2008; Mons, 2007a; Nóvoa, 2001). Other analysed how PISA contributed to legitimate new global education policies such as decentralisation, school choice or curriculum diversification (Mons, 2007b) or questioned the influence of PISA on the French evaluation policy of the educational system (Pons, 2008; van Zanten, 2004). But the main trend in the French academic debate, which emerged very progressively in the 2000s, was either to adopt a normative position on the possible political uses (or abuses) of PISA or to discuss the quality and legitimacy of its methodology. Only few researchers, mainly past or present members of the Institute of research in education from Dijon (IREDU), used in their works the data and conclusions of PISA studies to analyse the global equity and efficiency of several education devices (Mons & Pons, 2009). But these works rarely questioned the possible impact of PISA itself.

What were the effects of PISA on the French education policy process? Was there in France a PISA shock comparable to that of Germany, that is to say a convergent and brutal evolution of public debate towards an acceptance of a whole series of

reforms deemed necessary by the results of this survey? Did French policy makers and institutional actors present in the educational field learn from this international evaluation and what did they learn? To contribute to answer to these questions, this paper analyses, on the basis of several materials (see box 1), the reception accorded to the OECD's PISA program since its creation by the various national-level actors who participate in the French policy debate. By "reception", we do not mean simple vertical transmission of messages from the international to the national level nor, for that matter, transmission that took place "after" the conception and implementation of PISA. In keeping with the work of Mangez (2008), we conceive reception as a cognitive activity in the course of which messages are accepted, refused or renegotiated.

In that perspective, we assume that there is no mechanical and unilateral relationship between the knowledge produced by PISA concerning the French educational system and the knowledge used in France in the name of PISA. The knowledge produced thanks to PISA concerning the French educational system is not rigid but always translated in the public debate (Callon, 1986; Lascoumes, 1996; Pons, 2008).

In order to give an account of this perpetual process of translation, this paper is divided into three parts. First, we present the particular notion that we will use to analyse the type of common knowledge which is progressively shaped in the French national policy debate about PISA: the notion of

This research was conducted for the European project *Know&Pol*. We complied with the methodological guidelines produced by the coordinators of the project even if, sometimes, we had to adapt them to the specificities of the French case and the requirements of field work. We have thus conducted thirty interviews with the various actors and decision-makers involved in PISA in France, consulted the professional literature on this topic (public studies and reports, articles in specialized reviews, books and manuals) and carried out bibliographical research on documentary databases (the PERIOD database of the IREDU, the ERIC and FRANCIS databases of the INRP and the HAL-SHS and Article@inist online catalogues). Where necessary, we have also drawn upon material accumulated in the course of earlier research (Pons, 2008), particularly in what concerns the internal operation of certain organizations. Lastly, we have carried out a survey of the press by cross-checking four different sources of information: the dispatches of a press service that specializes in the education sector (AEF), which will be in this article our central source given the fact that it concentrates on the institutional life in the educational field; an inventory of articles and statements to the media prepared by a press attaché at the Ministry of National Education (an inventory obtained in the course of the research), the catalogue of wide public press articles that can be consulted thanks to the PRESSED computer program and the online papers of various trade unions and professional associations. These sources, the manner in which they were used and a detailed list of interviews may be consulted in the public report on which this paper relies (Mons & Pons, 2009, pp. 121-131).

*argumentaire*, a French term inspired by Foucault analyses (especially Foucault, 1969). Second, thanks to the 275 dispatches published between April 1999 and March 2009 by a press agency that specializes in the education sector (AEF), we identify two main actors able to propose such *argumentaires*. Third, we provide a schematized model of the content of each *argumentaire* to better study then its concrete forms and its circulation in the policy debate between 2001 and 2008. This paper will concentrate on the institutional debate, fuelled by the statements and exchanges between actors such as the Ministry of Education and its various departments, its general inspection, the OECD, the teachers' trade-unions, the parents' associations and scholars. It will not analyse the use of these *argumentaires* in the wide public policy debate.

#### ARGUMENTAIRES: DEFINITION AND PROPERTIES

By *argumentaire*, we understand a more or less stable and coherent set of arguments (scientific, technical or political) that aid in explaining to the public the main results achieved by French students in the PISA tests. These arguments may point to the specificity

of the PISA exam (e.g., the institutional form of the program, the results offered, the survey methodology, etc.), point out the various pedagogical characteristics in France or in other countries (either because they are models to be emulated or studiously avoided) or to match the current atmosphere with regards to national or supranational education policy. These *argumentaires* combine and integrate (with varying degrees of success and relevance) elements drawn from the PISA survey into a set of considerations that either predated or ran parallel to the PISA and that are proper to the backgrounds, identities and discourses of the actors who make them. Thus, they may be regarded as knowledge entirely produced by these actors of the French educational system using the PISA as their starting point.

These *argumentaires* are rarely stated once and for all in a final version and trotted out unaltered throughout the period. Rather each actor continually adds to them, tending to associate his/her discourse to greater or lesser extent with one *argumentaire* or another, or even in some cases with combinations of various ones. These *argumentaires* are not mobilized in a constant fashion but rather in the service of individual interests within a specific set of circumstances. They all remain more or less faithful to the conclusions of the study yet do not necessarily limit

themselves to the PISA's conclusions. At times PISA serves as a pretext to advance an *argumentaire* aimed at decision makers.

What are these *argumentaires*? At first glance, all the actors on a national stage that we studied (decision makers, journalists, experts and evaluators, researchers, unions, etc.) are susceptible to offering their own *argumentaire*. It can even be assumed that the moment a collective actor, or an isolated individual for that matter publicly evokes the PISA study, he is more likely than not to offer an *argumentaire* or at the very least add to a pre-existing one. However, the analysis of the evolution of the public debate in institutional arenas that the PISA provoked in France amply demonstrates just how incapable these actors have been in proposing an *argumentaire* general enough to inspire others to carry on their efforts and thus circulate widely (Mons & Pons, 2009). In fact, as shows the following part, two key groups of actors have been since the beginning in such a position: the members of the OECD and the ministry of national education (whether it is the DEPP<sup>1</sup>, i.e. its

department of statistics and evaluation, the handful of researchers who has collaborated with it, cabinet members or the minister himself).

## TEN YEARS OF COGNITIVE USES OF PISA IN THE FRENCH POLICY DEBATE: A SYNOPTIC VIEW

It is impossible in such a format to analyse all the factors that can lead an actor, individual or collective, to use PISA in one of his/her/its cognitive activities and then to detail all the cognitive uses of the survey in the French policy debate that can be observed since PISA was created. For the purpose of our demonstration, we simply provide a synoptic view of the evolution of this national debate in the institutional arena based on the dispatches published between April 1999 and March 2009 by a press agency that specializes in the education sector (AEF)<sup>2</sup>. For several reasons which are presented in box 2, these dispatches constitute a reliable indica-

### 2. SOURCES

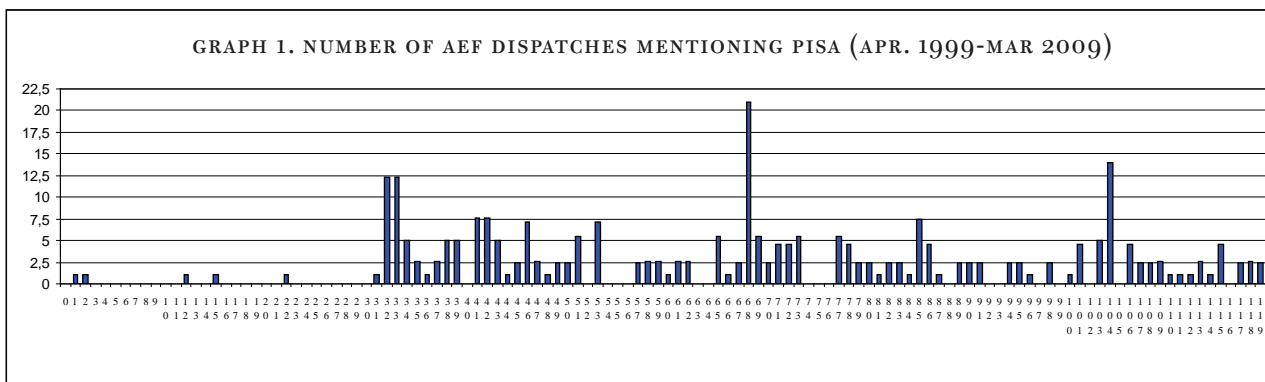
The AEF was created in 1998 by two journalists who wished to improve the information available concerning two sectors of activity which, in their view, operated in a relatively closed manner: education and professional training. The agency presently includes around forty journalists, nearly ten of whom work specifically on the topic of primary and secondary education. It offers its clients a continuous, synthetic and factual stream of information concerning the implementation of reforms in the educational system and the evolution of national public debate in the area of compulsory and higher education. The AEF has thus gradually established itself as a decisive source of information within a ministry where services function in a relatively vertical and compartmentalized fashion, with decision-makers, leaders and actors in the field in dialogue via the intermediary of multiple press dispatches. We have observed this phenomenon in the course of earlier field work (Pons, 2008). Thus the AEF work is a good indicator for scholars wishing to observe the institutional debate.

Between April 1999 and March 2009, the AEF has published 275 dispatches mentioning PISA. Among these, 122 are press reviews covering the main national and also international daily papers and magazines. These reviews have been addressed by a separate work upon which we have only slightly drawn for the present study (specifically, for graph 1 below) as crosschecking with other press reviews has revealed that the manner in which the French press has been covered is at times (in particular, during the first years) too synthetic and uneven to allow for reliable analysis. 153 other news items of various types (reports of press statements, interviews, analysis of official texts, summaries of recent reports, summaries of seminars, etc.), have been gathered together in a second data set and it is on this basis that the other graphs and the table that follow have been constructed. In particular, we focused on the type of interlocutors mentioned in the dispatches (who is talking about PISA?) and on the cognitive uses to which they have put PISA. For further details concerning the construction of the data set and its variables, see Mons and Pons (2009, pp. 129-131).

tor of the global development and intensity of institutional debate concerning PISA in France.

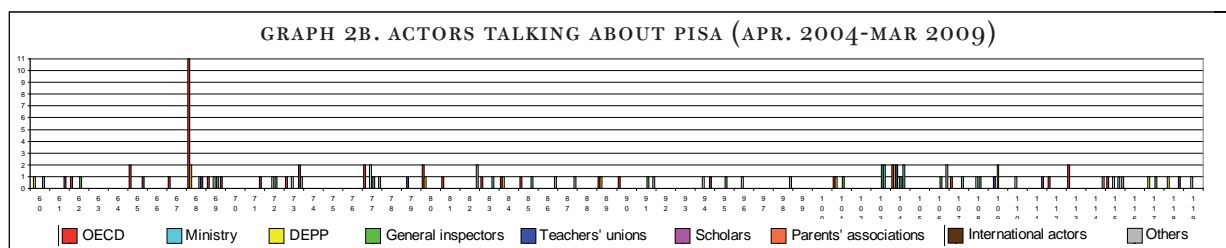
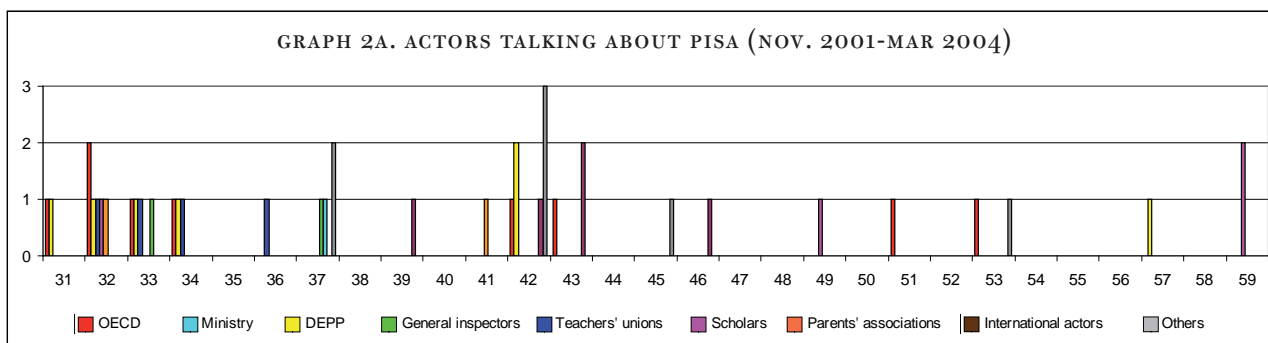
Graph 1 presents an inventory of the total number of dispatches concerning PISA published by the AEF each month between April 1999 and March 2009<sup>3</sup>.

One immediately observes three peaks in the quantity of reporting on PISA, corresponding to the publication of official results for PISA 2000 (December 2001, month 32), PISA 2003 (December 2004, month 68) and PISA 2006 (December 2007, month 104).



These peaks are followed by several periods of discussion of above average intensity, as in November and December 2002 (month 41 and 42), a fact that is principally explained by treatments of PISA in the

foreign press (in Germany, Switzerland and Finland in particular) and OECD publications concerning its work (the publication of *Education at a Glance* and thematic reports).



According to Graphs 2a and 2b, the main actor talking about PISA in France is, without surprise, the OECD. According to our source, however, its interventions are intermittent over time. With the exception of a few studies in September and December 2005 (months 77 and 80) in which its education department used the data from PISA, the OECD mainly intervened during the publication of the results of PISA 2000 (month 32) and PISA 2003 (month 68).

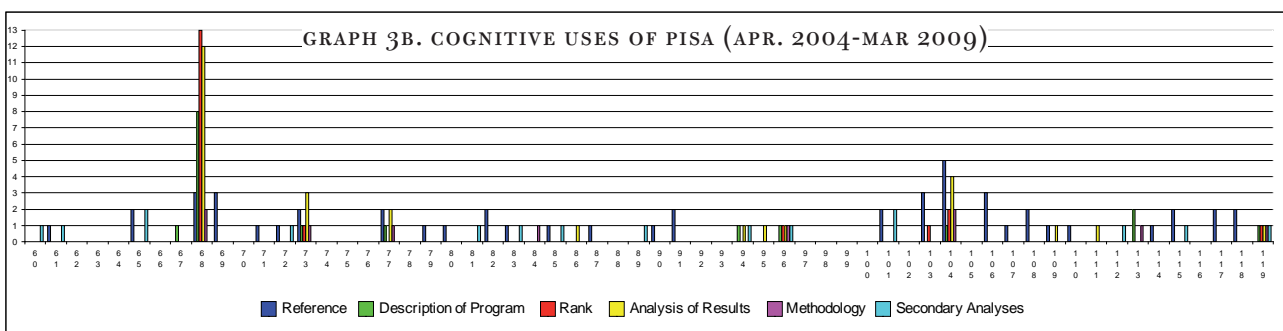
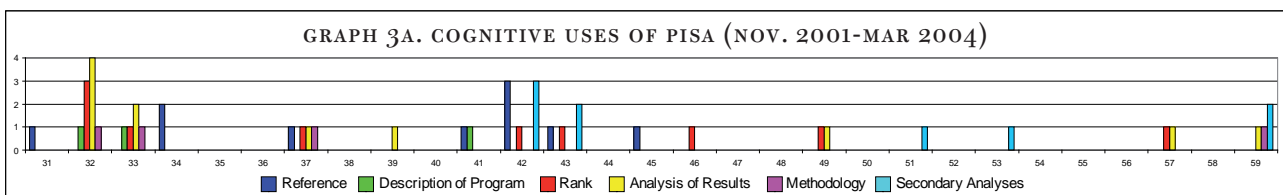
Two other types of actors regularly intervened but to a lesser degree. The first of these was the European Commission (the principal international actor responsible for the development of this category). Several European Education and Culture Commissioners granted interviews to the French media or made remarks picked up by the media at international conferences. Drawing upon the data from PISA, some of the work produced by Eurydice also fell into this category. The second actor to intervene

was the Ministry of National Education (“MEN” in graph 2a), principally through the DEPP. Here, too, the main interventions took place during the publication of results at the various sessions of PISA. In the months following each session, the DEPP offered an analysis of the results of France, either in the framework of more detailed publications (special issues of the review *Education et formations*) or in that of conferences organized by the various actors of the educational system (unions in particular).

The contribution of scholars is ambivalent. Of small importance from the point of view of the number of dispatches, scholarly contributions have mainly fallen outside of these peaks in official statements concerning the results. They thus occasionally contribute to reviving the debate over France’s results in PISA, most often by bringing additional light to bear on the matter or by calling into question the official analyses of the Ministry. By contrast, the Ministry’s pedagogical network training staff,

territorial and high central inspectors) very seldom intervenes in the debate, though several high central inspectors have mentioned the results of PISA, either in an isolated fashion or following the publication of individual reports. Other actors, such as parents’ associations and mid-level managers in the educational system, are by and large absent. How was PISA used by all these institutional actors?

Graphs 3a and 3b distinguish between the various types of cognitive use that can be found in short and synthetic dispatches. They show that, with the exception of the communication peaks mentioned above and a few secondary analyses in periods during which the number of interventions was diminishing, very few of the discussions of PISA mentioned by AEF dispatches go over the description and analysis of results. The principal cognitive use consists in simply mentioning the program — or even just recalling France’s rank — in a more general rationale.



Moreover, when one compares, as in Table 1, the type of cognitive use with the type of interlocutor, a clear distinction is to be seen between the small number of actors who are capable of analyzing the survey’s results and methodology or offer a secondary analysis on the basis of PISA data (members of the OECD, scholars and, to a lesser extent, DEPP statisticians) and those who limit themselves in the best of cases to a simple reference to the program in the context of a more general discussion (representatives of the Ministry, teachers’ unions and high central inspectors).

Thus, given the technical and fragmented nature of the institutional debate in France regarding PISA (which from the very beginning was limited to a small circle of insiders), two groups were in a position to provide an *argumentaire*, who would shape the official stance on the results of the PISA in France and greatly structured the kinds of arguments that would circulate subsequently. Two distinct *argumentaires* clearly emerge from our source materials. The first might be termed the “bias *argumentaire*”, and it was developed initially by the education ministry. The second, termed the “ideal governance *argumentaire*”

TABLE 1  
COGNITIVE USES OF PISA BY TYPE OF ACTOR (APRIL 1999 — MARCH 2009)

ACTORS	COGNITIVE USES						TOTAL OF DISPATCHES
	Reference in a Discussion	General Discussion of the Program	Mention of Leaders and Ranking Gaps	Description and Analysis of Results	Analysis of Methodology	Secondary Analysis	
OCDE	7,94%	68,18%	45,16%	41,30%	15,79%	52,00%	69
MEN	15,87%	0,00%	3,23%	4,35%	5,26%	0,00%	14
DEP(P)	14,29%	4,55%	9,68%	13,04%	31,58%	4,00%	26
High Central Inspectors	15,87%	4,55%	3,23%	4,35%	5,26%	0,00%	15
Teachers	4,76%	4,55%	0,00%	2,17%	5,26%	0,00%	6
Headteachers	0,00%	0,00%	0,00%	0,00%	0,00%	0,00%	0
Scholars	9,52%	18,18%	16,13%	19,57%	31,58%	20,00%	35
Parents	1,59%	0,00%	0,00%	2,17%	0,00%	0,00%	2
International Actors	11,11%	0,00%	16,13%	6,52%	0,00%	12,00%	18
Others	19,05%	0,00%	6,45%	6,52%	5,26%	12,00%	21
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	206

Fonte: Data Set 2, 153 AEF dispatches concerning PISA during the period.

was promoted by the OECD. Interestingly, these two *argumentaires* seem to experience contrary evolutionary tendencies between 2001 and 2008, the influence of the second one developing at the expense of the first one.

#### THE BIAS *ARGUMENTAIRE*: BETWEEN REACTIVE POLITICS AND SCIENTIFIC INQUIRY

This *argumentaire* seeks to explain the results of French students in the PISA study by focusing on its inherent biases when analyzing the test re-

sults. This concentration on the PISA methodology can also be explained by the fact that, since the beginning of PISA, France had proposed another conception of international assessment (Bottani & Vrignaud, 2005). After failing at the first bid for the creation of the PISA 2000 consortium, France has now joined the PISA 2007 consortium. These methodology interrogations applied to the conception of the international exam itself as well as its administration on French soil. These biases have several forms: cultural, political or

#### 3. BIAS *ARGUMENTAIRE*: A SCHEMATIC VIEW

This *argumentaire* is made up of the following arguments (or explanatory factors).

1. The cultural bias inherent in the conception of the PISA study survey itself (it is made up in the main of Anglo-Saxon questions...)
2. The PISA does not measure knowledge acquisition (as is the case in France or as the IEA does in its evaluations) but skills and competences.
3. The PISA is not a universal measure; rather it is a practical statistical tool among others (it criticizes the one-dimensional aspect as well as its final rankings)
4. The structure of the sample of 15 year old students explains the dispersion of the results as well as their average character (distinction between middle school students in mainstream education, vocational or technical, or between failing students and those deemed “on level” etc.)
5. French students tend not to attempt to answer a question if they do not understand it (the stigma attached to making a mistake or reserved student attitudes are not sufficiently taken into account in the exam design which favours those who guess an answer to questions they do not know)

methodological. Box 3 synthesizes them while giving a few examples.

These five arguments, as we shall see shortly, have not always been used together in the same discourse, but each contributes in its own way to disseminate the bias *argumentaire*. Moreover, some arguments will evolve over time. This *argumentaire* is often understood both within France as well as abroad, as France's official position.

The bias *argumentaire* makes its appearance in its complete form at the first press conference given on the PISA in France by the DEPP on December 4, 2001 (dispatch AEF n.21989) and will then evolve according to the periods and the actors who will use it. It was presented by its Director with the full backing of its cabinet. He also enlisted the support of certain researchers who had collaborated with the DEPP on multiple occasions and who had participated directly in the conception of the PISA on the international level. With the exception of argument 3, this *argumentaire* was reproduced in its entirety in the Director's informational notes published for the occasion (DEP, 2001).

The bias *argumentaire* presented therefore two advantages for the ministry. For the ministerial cabinet, hoping to minimize the importance of the study in an election year, it made it possible to appease the public outcry by putting France's average standing in perspective; and it was able to do so on scientific grounds. Moreover it provided the opportunity to manifest the ministry's support for French educators who would most likely be unfavourable to such a survey, all the while demonstrating its confidence in its own internal evaluators. For the DEPP that was just emerging from a political period during which its mandate had been contested and its work discredited by the Education Minister Claude Allègre, this *argumentaire* presented three distinct advantages. First it made it possible for this ministry department to showcase its competence (the DEPP represents France in different PISA committees and discusses the results on a national level); next, it justified its renewed collaboration with researchers on education and, finally, promoted its own expertise. The bias *argumentaire* therefore harmonizes at this precise moment all the political interests of the key players in the French education system.

The upper management of the DEPP disseminated the information through various channels in institutional arenas. It was presented at different venues for professional debate during the first half of 2002, for example at the FSU<sup>4</sup> meeting in January which brought together three members of the DEPP and other teachers and union researchers, or the seminar on international comparisons organized by the General Director of School Teaching (DGESCO) for administrators and inspectors. In November 2002, a DEPP special issue, which represented the major contribution to the PISA at the moment of its publication, also included the bias *argumentaire* in its entirety (DEP, 2002, pp. 5-6, 12-15, 160). This text was disseminated throughout the network of inspectors and instructors indirectly thanks to those who had been part of national study groups charged with proposing consortium items and analyzing France's the PISA results. In November 2004 for example some high central inspectors evoked certain elements of the *argumentaire* in their position papers (arguments 1 and 3). All throughout the academic year 2004-2005 the former director of the DEPP at the time of the publication of the PISA results in 2000 expressed in his seminar at the EHESS<sup>5</sup> certain arguments related to methodological biases, especially during sessions devoted explicitly to the methodology of international evaluations, or certain conclusions drawn from them.

In addition, criticism of this *argumentaire* by researchers has in general been muted during this period, in part because most of them agreed with it, as was the case of certain French specialists of psychometrics, or because when criticism did exit, it was published in highly specialized journals with limited readership, or again because early research on the PISA was commissioned in large part by the DEPP, who set the research agenda to focus on the survey's methodology, hoping to apply its own expertise to the test and improve France's propositions (Mons & Pons, 2009, pp. 29-35).

Finally the very nature of this *argumentaire* — its relatively closed feature — played in its favour. It changed the topic of assessment, in effect making it difficult for institutional actors, who might be tempted, to question the French educational model in a country that always defend its cultural exception and in which international comparisons did



not have a significant impact on the institutional debate before the 1990s (Pons, 2008), and developing a term based on scientific arguments for the discourse of those who tried. From 2001 to 2004, this bias *argumentaire* progressively became a total explanatory system, self-sufficient, obviating any need to further pursue the questions raised by the PISA. This *argumentaire* is most successful when it is least talked about. Thus, unsurprisingly, when in December 2004 the DEPP held its second press conference on the results of the 2003 PISA, we find on the list of reasons offered to explain France's results, arguments 2 and 4, to which we might add some thoughts about the construction of the scale of skills being used which would explain in part the increase in the number of students having trouble (dispatch AEF n.48439).

Beginning in 2005, progressively the situation changed. These institutional actors began to think about PISA as invitation to think deeply about the concept of such a study (Mons & Pons, 2009, pp. 47-51). During interviews given to the press in response to the releasing of the PISA 2003 results, there was hardly any mention made of the bias question on the part of the members of the DEPP, who preferred to confine themselves more often to a review of the content of national programs and a technical description of the survey (results by skill type). During a conference held in January 2005 to put together a European school project, the former director of the DEPP who had been in charge of the first official communication in December 2001, posited that it was still necessary to “drill down” into the PISA results and insisted that they “should be interpreted with caution” (dispatch AEF n.49435). That same month, Norberto Bottani, former administrator of the OECD, who had previously played a key role in the OECD's INES project, and Pierre Vrignaud, French expert in psychometrics, submitted a report on France and international comparisons to the High Commission of school evaluation (HCEE). If these authors continued to make mention of the PISA's methodological bias, they were equally critical of the lack of interest in France for this kind of study and called for great investment on the part of French researchers and experts in the conception of these tools. The same trend is visible in the HCEE's position on the report (Forestier *et al.*, 2007, pp. 257-266). Without the constant backing of

the DEPP, and largely ignored in the press, this *argumentaire* seemed to lose its relevance in the eyes of the public increasingly accustomed to the instrument known as the PISA. The changing attitude among politicians on the question of methodology, already visible by 2006, also helps explain this trend (Mons & Pons, 2009, pp. 39-57, 62-75).

Yet it reappeared in three different contexts after 2006. The first took place in April 2006 and referred to a heated exchange between Claude Sauvageot, head of International and European Affairs for the DEPP, and Andreas Schleicher, director of the OECD PISA program, about the reasons explaining why France did not want to publish its results concerning social inequalities between schools (lack of representativeness of the fifteen years old students and disagreement regarding the reporting of “parents' professions” in the survey for the former, political censorship for the latter, dispatch AEF n.64594). The polemic continued to rage on until the publication of *Education at a Glance* in September 2006. For instance, during a press conference held by the OECD in order to discuss what the French education system could learn from this publication, Claude Sauvageot warned “against the risk of senseless reductions” provoked by certain correlations drawn from collection of statistical indicators, for example between the cost of secondary education and the number of hours of instruction which are greater [in France] than in the countries that ranked higher (dispatch AEF n.68288).

The bias *argumentaire* reappeared after March 2007, but in a modified version, in the comments of Christian Forestier, cabinet director of the Ministry of Education and president of the HCEE from 2003 to 2005, accompanying the publication of the PISA 2000 results. He explicitly used PISA to criticize the inegalitarian nature of the French education system, which according to him only properly prepared about half of the students, as well as the perverse system of leaving students behind. So what we see here is a noticeable evolution of argument 4 concerning the structure of samples. What at first started as a simple methodological objection, slowly transformed, in particular with regards to the harmful effects of being left behind, into a distinction between “on level” students and the others, and then into a distinction between “good” and “bad” students.

The last cycle of the bias *argumentaire* started in December 2007 and it has been used by various unions (SE-Unsa, Snes-FSU) in the form of public statements, usually in response to the Minister's communiqués which have made reference to PISA more and more frequently. Argument 2 has been the most common element of the *argumentaire* evoked by these actors aiming to remind everyone that the PISA only tests one aspect of the education that students receive in France, and therefore that it is unjustifiable to use the PISA to overhaul the entire educational system. Finally, these arguments were used by union representatives to criticize the sitting Minister's use of this international survey for his own purposes (dispatches AEF n.87928 and 88031).

Thus, contrary to the previous period (2000-2004), there is a less top-down launching of this *argumentaire* than a fragmented effort within a public debate serving multiple interests. The reemergence of this *argumentaire* had more to do with political considerations than scientific ones (OECD's internal struggles, willingness to weigh in on reforms, reaction to the Minister's policies). All of this led to a considerable transformation of its content (see for example the evolution of argument 4 on the structure of samples).

#### THE IDEAL GOVERNANCE *argumentaire*: FROM LOCALIZED TECHNICAL EXPERTISE TO POLITICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Through its written reports, during talks given at various conferences that it organized to disseminate the PISA results, or again through the interventions of experts in the public debate, the OECD developed another *argumentaire* built around an idealized educational model that went well beyond the technical lessons of its study. We will call this set of arguments the "ideal governance *argumentaire*", whether the governance in question relates to the system as a whole, its administration, or its schools.

A part of this *argumentaire* is linked to an analysis of the cognitive measurement of student learning acquisition. The OECD stresses the relative effectiveness of different educational systems and is also attached to an ideal of social democracy: equality need not be attained at the detriment of efficiency; on the contrary, the most egalitarian systems are

also the most efficient, Finland being the preeminent example. But the OECD also went beyond a strict analysis of the results produced by this cognitive tool by reflecting on an ideal educational model which can be attached to different political shades: neo-liberal recommendations (school autonomy, development of the private sector, absence of the link between performance and resources) or Social-Democrat (comprehensive schools, individualized instruction). In France, this *argumentaire* has taken the form of a list of explanatory factors (more or less postulated) of French results to the PISA survey as well as arguments in favour of improving the governance of the educational system. These arguments have been drawn either from the PISA survey as it was administered in France and elsewhere, from other comparative surveys, or from the ideal educational model extolled to greater or lesser degree by the OECD. We provide a schematized version of this *argumentaire* in box 4.

The ideal governance *argumentaire* as it appeared in French institutional debate, developed out of the conclusions immediately drawn from the PISA 2000 survey between 2000 and 2004. In that period, the OECD members' reports and official communications were in general limited to technical analyses of the disparities in the countries' ranking even though the social-democratic empirical proof that greater equality (or equity) led necessarily to greater efficiency was already apparent from the start (dispatch AEF n.22012).

All this changed with the publication of the PISA 2003 results. In a new national and supranational political landscape favourable to the development of indicators of results in education (Lisbon strategy, preparation of a new orientation law and a new budget law), the ideal governance *argumentaire* began to get better coverage in the media. Arguments 1, 2, 6, 7, and 8 were the most commonly cited in the press. The AEF press agency even devoted over ten press releases to the detailed analysis of each key explanatory factor of the French results. Members of the OECD like Bernard Hugonnier (French assistant director to education at the OECD) or Andréas Schleicher were invited by the media to give their diagnosis of the current functioning of the education system and to propose remedies (Mons & Pons, 2009, pp. 40-47, 75-89).

This *argumentaire* is based in particular on the following arguments to explain France's PISA results.

*On the overall education system*

1. Insufficient school autonomy (the more autonomous the school, the more likely it can adjust its techniques efficiently and according to realities on the ground)
2. The inequitable French educational system (highly selective nature of secondary instruction, perverse effects of being held back etc.)
3. Inefficiency of the school system (absence of a link between the increase in funding and better results).
4. Limited targeted and intense action regarding school assistance

*On the school level and its immediate environment*

5. Negative students' attitudes towards school
6. Instructor discouragement
7. The healthy or positive climate in the school (the decisive role of the principals' investment in student success)
8. The weak ties between parents and the running of the school as well as their investment in their children's academic success

This greater media coverage contributed to accelerate the circulation of the ideal governance *argumentaire*. In May 2005, the International Centre for Pedagogical Studies (CIEP) — an organism under the auspices of the Ministry of Education whose mission it is to promote the teaching of French and French expertise abroad — invited the German and Finish PISA representatives to the “International Press Forum on Education”. Andréas Schleicher attended one of the sessions dedicated to international comparisons and declared that he regarded PISA more than anything as a “tool for identifying these differences” (dispatch AEF n.52147). In an interview for the AEF press agency in September 2005, Bernard Hugonnier stated that support was building for international comparisons in France. More than ever French decision-makers and even families were becoming interested in them. He also thought that the French system was inefficient (argument 4), in particular regarding the absence of a link between invested financial resources and school performance as well as in the imbalance in the funding between secondary school levels and universities (dispatch AEF n.55915). He also got involved during the same period talking with the teachers' unions, at first at the global level (at European union council meetings called to discuss the PISA 2003 results) and later on the national level (at the Snes-FSU).

According to our interviews, his remarks regarding PISA were clearly assimilated by the head of the SNPDEN (the main union of headteachers), especially the argument related to the effects of school autonomy on student performance (argument 1).

In May 2006, Xavier Darcos, acting as France's OECD ambassador, took the ideal governance *argumentaire* to the UMP; the conservative party created to support Nicolas Sarkozy's bid for the presidency. He in particular pushed for the necessary increase in school autonomy (argument 1, dispatch AEF n.61749). In September of the same year the *Revue des inspections générales* proposed a dual interview with Xavier Darcos and Bernard Hugonnier for its issue number 3. This interview contained most of the key elements of this *argumentaire* (arguments 1, 2, 3, 4 and 8 in particular).

This tendency was reinforced with the publication of the PISA 2006 survey results. On December 1, 2007, Bernard Hugonnier simultaneously offered his comments of France's PISA results in the columns of the AEF. He explained the weak level of French students by saying that they had no trouble reasoning scientifically but that they were unable to apply that reasoning to explain the world around them. He then said that the French system was underperforming and elitist in nature (argument 2) and that Finland's high marks could not easily be

explained only by the low level of immigration in this country. Finally he recommended several solutions to improve the French educational system. These recommendations should by now be familiar (arguments 2 and 3) and were exposed over a year before in the *Revue des inspections générales*. In September 2008, Andréas Schleicher was asked specifically by the AEF about what reforms were needed to improve France's educational system. Once again, several elements of the ideal governance *argumentaire* can be identified (arguments 1 and 4).

Another sign that this *argumentaire* has enjoyed wider circulation is that minor actors less directly associated with the Ministry and its immediate education policy have adopted it. In May 2005 for example, Alain Bournazel, chief economic and financial officer for Employment and for Professional Training for the Ministry of Economics, Finance and Industry gave an interview to the AEF where he claimed that henceforth it would be necessary to evaluate training performance. He cites PISA without going into detail about the report (dispatch AEF n.53317). Another similar example involves Thierry de Vulpillières, director of educational partnerships at Microsoft France. In an interview with the AEF, he supported his contention that new information in the classroom by referring to France's low ranking in the PISA survey. He made explicit mention of argument 3 regarding the lack of efficiency of the French education system and advocated for student instruction that was more focused on skills than knowledge acquisition.

As a consequence of this accelerated circulation, the content of the *argumentaire* was progressively altered. The main transformation manifested itself in a vulgarization that betrayed to greater or less extents the content of the survey (like when people say, for example that France is at the bottom of the PISA rankings). Generally, this happened through a politization of the ideal governance *argumentaire*,

especially in the treatment of PISA 2006 in the media. In that process, the role of the OECD members changed moving from simple purveyors of technical expertise to highly visible media savvy political consultants (Mons & Pons, 2009, pp. 75-89).

## CONCLUSION

The analysis of the trajectories of these two *argumentaires* reveals that there is a profound discrepancy between the knowledge produced in the PISA survey on the performance of the French pupils and the knowledge used to fuel public discourses concerning PISA in France, to the extent that this knowledge is constantly being reformulated by the relevant actors. Many factors can explain this process of permanent translation that we could not detail in this article: political interests in particular circumstances but also old cleavages and debates, organizational features, unequal cognitive predispositions to use PISA (training, professional competencies, professional identities), national policy agenda (for example the evolution of the French evaluation policy), struggle within the OECD between the general secretary and representatives of the member countries over the management of several projects run by this international organization etc.

Among them, the cognitive properties of the *argumentaires* themselves play a role. If the bias *argumentaire* drew its force from its scientifically based capacity to neutralize all attempts at international comparison with the French educational model, the ideal governance *argumentaire*, by contrast, drew its growing influence on decision-makers from its centripetal character, that is to say, its capacity to pull to its hard core supplementary arguments — both scientific and political — more or less supported by the content of the PISA survey. The form of knowledge partly predetermines its political uses.

## ENDNOTES

1. Department for evaluation, prospective and performance.

2. See Mons and Pons (2009, pp. 39-98) for a qualitative complementary analysis, for each PISA session, of the cognitive pre-dispositions to use PISA of the main national-level actors.

3. Each month is indicated by a number running from 0 (April 1999) to 119 (March 2009). For the needs of presentation, graphs 2a and 3a do not mention months 0 to 30 (October 2001) since, in the second dataset on which they are based, only one dispatch mentioned Pisa (in May 1999) to announce the launching of the program.

4. Main federation of unions in the education sector.

5. College specialized in social sciences studies.

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