

# Grappling with PISA. Reception and translation in the Hungarian policy discourse

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## ABSTRACT:

Hungary is one of the European countries whose education system has repeatedly been diagnosed as showing below average performance with above-average variance between schools when compared to other countries participating in the OECD's PISA survey. This article explores how this diagnosis was received by domestic actors and discusses the main characteristics and arguments of the national public debates invoked by the PISA. The national PISA discourse is analysed by looking at how the problem definitions proposed by international ideas about the necessity to strengthen ties between schooling, labour market demands and economic competitiveness eventually reframed national policy solutions after a process of translation and recontextualization.

## KEYWORDS:

Educational reform, Hungary, PISA, Policy discourse.

## INTRODUCTION

This article is based on the Hungarian case study on the national reception of the OECD's PISA survey. It was prepared as a part of a collaborative effort of six European countries' research teams within the Know&Pol research project's comparative inquiry<sup>1</sup>. The fieldwork for the study was done between April 2008 and March 2009 in which 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted with key decision-makers, experts and technical coordinators, and a document analysis of scientific and popular media publications (of the period between 2001 and 2008) was carried out as well<sup>2</sup>.

Hungary is one of the countries that made an international bad reputation for its results on the OECD's 2000 Programme for International Student Assessment which showed "above-average inequality combined with below average performance" (OECD, 2001, p. 191). The PISA 2003 survey indicated similar outcomes. In 2006, although the science performance was around average, the math performance was below the international average and Hungarian students were again in the lowest third of the ranking of developed countries in reading. In the foreword of the Hungarian PISA 2006 report the results were interpreted as follows:

Again, it is a recurring message that we belong to those group of countries in which students' performance is determined the most by their home background, where between-school differences are the

biggest and where these differences mainly reflect the socio-cultural differences between students (Balázsi *et al.*, 2008, p. 6).

The purpose of this article is to show how the "shocking" results of the PISA influenced the educational discourses and policy-making on the national level. Andreas Schleicher, the head of the Indicators and Analysis Division of the OECD, was recently invited to write the foreword to a collection of policy recommendations prepared by a committee of Hungarian scientists (Fazekas *et al.*, 2009). In the final paragraph, he provides a general diagnosis and critique of domestic policy-making and explains the changes it should undergo in order to meet OECD's standards:

(t)he road from a comfortable, introverted, input-focused, and evidence-light approach towards a demanding, outward-looking, results-focused, and evidence-informed approach will be steep. But addressing the challenges will become ever-more important as the world has become indifferent to tradition and past reputations, unforgiving to frailty and ignorant to custom or practice. Success will go to those individuals and countries which are swift to adapt, slow to complain and open to change. The task for policy makers in Hungary will be to ensure that the country rises to this challenge (Fazekas *et al.*, 2009, p. 12).

The words of the chief expert — a key character in fabricating PISA and formulating the international

PISA-discourse — indicate that the ambitious PISA project demands a transformation that downgrades local specificities and conventional values traditionally assigned to education. Instead, a futurist rhetoric of dynamism and of proactive adjustment is established. In the following, firstly we will briefly discuss the strategy of “soft governance” that OECD applies to exert pressure on national policy-makers. This will serve as an introduction to our analysis of how global educational discourses entered the national space through PISA and in what ways these, shaped domestic educational discourses and enacted hybridized policies.

## PISA, AN INSTRUMENT OF REGULATION

The potentials of PISA as a governance tool has to be discussed in the context of the emerging globalised educational policy field where intergovernmental and supranational organizations play an indirect but increasingly influential role in shaping national educational policies. Sometimes this generates hostile feelings from the part of national actors, in most cases however, the role played by these organizations in agenda-setting is more than welcome. Furthermore, some governments “have also seemingly ceded some of their autonomy in public policy development to IGOs in the context of globalization” (Lingard & Grek, 2007, p. 2). The surrender, and in some cases, the genuine invitation for external agencies to participate in setting the goals for national policy making comes from several sources. In the case of post-socialist Hungary, the Western orientation and the eagerness to join the “civilised West” cleans the obstacles from PISA’s way to enter the national educational discourses.

Grek and colleagues (Grek *et al.*, 2009) analyzed the shift towards “soft” forms of governance and their relevance in the construction of the new global and European educational policy field. They stress that its strength lies in its communicative power: PISA spreads through processes of formulating opinions and coordination (Lingard & Grek, 2007, p. 5). PISA enters the national educational policy discourse smoothly and without generating conflicts also because its influence is exerted in a

much more indirect way than in the case of more traditional modes of regulation. We consider that two meanings of performativity (coming from policy sociology and science studies) meet in PISA: it is a policy instrument and a scientific method at the same time. PISA is a master example of the performative techniques described by Ball (1998). He considers performativity as an element of the reform package embodying the shift taking place in the relationship between politics, government and education in Westernized, post-industrial countries. Performativity is “(a) form of indirect steering or steering at a distance which replaces intervention and prescription with target setting, accountability and comparison” (Ball, 1998, p. 123). The highly publicized PISA project turns public attention to the results of performance based testing and thus promotes a steering strategy that focuses on the outputs of education instead of the complexities of the teaching and learning process. The dramaturgy of PISA also embraces the ambition to shape the behaviour of actors at all levels from national decision making to the self-conduct of teachers and the child.

Michel Callon (1998) proposes the use of the concept of performativity in a different sense arguing that market theories have played a crucial role in producing realities that they describe: “economics does not describe an existing external ‘economy’, but brings that economy into being: economics performs the economy, creating the phenomena it describes” (MacKenzie & Millo, 2003, p. 108). It is in this respect that we should consider that PISA creates realities (Law & Urry, 2004); Law (2009, p. 240) argues that performative knowledge practices are scientific methods that “become sustainable only if they are (...) able to create knowledge (theories, data, whatever) that *work*, that somehow or other hold together, that are convincing and (crucial this) do whatever job is set for them. But then secondly and counterintuitively, they have to be able to *generate realities* that are fit for that knowledge” PISA projects expectations about what human workforce should be brought into being and the labour market realities they should be trained for.

A further feature that makes the framework of PISA attractive is the growing tendency to externalization in the justification of policies. Externalization “functions as the last source of authority and it is

invoked after self-reference falls short of its objectives” (Steiner-Khamsi, 2003, p. 2). Besides referencing external models, decision makers look for evidence to justify their actions. These trends meet in PISA which offers ready-made and easy to sell evidence for political action: “(t)he ranking and league-tables of OECD — and IEA — type studies constitute a measurable and easily accessible, albeit often biased and abbreviated form of ‘scientific rationality’, which enables political stakeholders in education to appeal to the general public when planning or suspending a comprehensive reform” (Steiner-Khamsi, 2003, p. 2) In the case of PISA, this “scientification of politics” (Offe, 1984) begins with the construction of the tests measuring students’ skills. The results are then presented on press conferences and at high level meetings where statistical evidence leaves the scientific domain and gets translated to the easily digestible narrative of competition: the national average scores are presented in the “league table of the nations”. Comparison generates competition; PISA hence produces “definitions of good or bad educational systems and required solutions” (Grek & Ozga, 2008, p. 2).

Armingeon (quoted by Morgan, 2009, p. 1) adds that soft forms of regulation by knowledge production and dissemination “can be quite effective when member states are ‘shamed’ into complying with OECD policies”. What paved the way for the shock and shame in Hungary was that students had traditionally been famous for achieving well. Not only the IEA surveys gave reasons for self-worshipping, but the achievements of the most talented (the number of medallists in Student’s Olympics) were comfortable so much for the teachers as the public opinion. In addition, the exceptional number of talented Hungarians and the brilliant inventions and discoveries given to the world by Hungarians have traditionally been sources of national pride. It was this status quo that after PISA was publicly reinterpreted as a myth and the national self-image of excellence was scattered. Therefore the indicators used traditionally and the quality of public education were questioned. The reworking of meanings has been completed rapidly: this can be illustrated for example by a 2004 ministerial booklet about the EU’s Education and Training 2010 Programme which commented remorsefully on how mistaken we had been in the perception of our national education system:

The indicators assisting comparisons and measurements are important tools in joint peer learning in an international context. These indicators are dreaded helpers of educational administration. Let us stop for a moment to recall the shocking effect of the PISA survey on our self-esteem. In 1996, in our first progress report for the EU, we reported that the educational system in Hungary was traditionally good. We did that with conviction and the EU confirmed that the educational system in Hungary was traditionally good. Of course, it was easy to believe that as we did not have convincing evidence on the quality of the functioning of the system. We focused on a few outstanding results, our Nobel Prize laureates, Olympic champions in mathematics and science, our internationally recognised professionals, and we liked to believe that everything was all right — as that was good for us. Indicators help us talk about issues that really matter (Farkas *et al.*, 2004, p. 75).

## EVOLVING SHOCK-PLOT

The PISA-survey already has a decade long history of shaping the educational discourse and the enactment of policies. Yet in the Hungarian case it seems heuristic to take a closer look at the period when PISA became a substantial point of reference in domestic policy-making in order to point to the processes of translation and recontextualization and to discuss how local particularities of policy making interacting with international knowledge flows created new educational realities. The reception of PISA can be perceived as a discursive practice in which the translation of the circulating, de-contextualized texts (Lingard *et al.*, 2005) to local “terms” and problems is a crucial moment. A specificity of these texts is that they

don’t bring with them the field of production of which they are a product, and the fact that recipients, who are themselves in a different field of production, reinterpret the texts in accordance with the structure of the field of reception, are facts that generate some formidable misunderstandings and that can have

good or bad consequences (Bourdieu, 1999 quoted by Lingard *et al.*, 2005, n. p.).

According to Willke (Willke, 1998, quoted by Nassehi *et al.*, 2007), the data which go through a system of relevancies and become information are inherently system specific: dependent on the system and relative concerning the system. This is the reason why “exchange” between different information-systems is per definitionem impossible. PISA became relevant in the domestic educational policy “information system” (Nassehi *et al.*, 2007) insofar as it provided such a coherent framework for political and scientific considerations and also fostered the reworking of meanings and the translation of generic solutions into practical policies and institutional practices.

While the Hungarian government in office at the time of the publication of the PISA 2000 survey results did not make a lot of comments on its diagnosis, around the elections held in April 2002, PISA became excessively referenced by the liberal party and was pushed to the horizon of publicity. PISA became interwoven with the agenda of the liberal “reform minister” and his confident high-ranking officials who eventually established the PISA discourse in the public and political domain, and used it as a discursive device through which the need for reform could be pronounced. To analyse how PISA was integrated into the reform discourse and to reconstruct the story of how it enacted education policies in the national setting, Kingdon’s multiple-streams approach to agenda-formation can provide us with an insight. Kingdon (1995) conceptualizes policy-change with the metaphor of three policy streams flowing through the system which he calls the “labyrinth of policy formation”. At some critical junctures, the *streams of problems, ideas (potential solutions) and politics* join and policy changes grow out from such couplings which open policy windows or possibilities to push conceptions of problems to the political agenda.

As for the “*political stream*”, shortly after the first PISA results came out at the end of 2001, in April 2002, the general elections were held in Hungary. PISA became an issue in the campaign and the political debate, as the government in office between 1998 and 2002 was repeatedly accused in public for their earlier indifference and for the withhold-

ing of the results from the wider public (e.g. Rádai, 2002). Their reluctance opened the possibility for the future minister (who himself had already been education minister from 1996-98) from the liberal Free Democrats Party to discover and put PISA in action as a multi-purpose rhetorical device. This coincidence in terms of the timing of the campaign, the publishing of the PISA results, and the attitude of the right wing government to PISA prepared an excellent terrain for the rhetoric of PISA to contrast old and new policies, and to make old ones “unthinkable” (Ball, 1998). The minister’s choice of advisors, and as he reported several times, his own training as a sociologist exerted a decisive impact on the government’s agenda setting. Several reform measures were launched (see Table 1) with repeated references made to PISA, thus PISA quickly became an “external authority” (Steiner-Khamsi, 2003) which could serve as an extra source to legitimate reform and which would provide the public support to advance controversial reforms<sup>3</sup>. Perhaps it is not an exaggeration to say that the intensive referencing of the “PISA-argument” during the campaign transformed the future minister himself, and the way he perceived the problems of public education (but not necessarily the solutions). The way he built up the image of the reform-minister and the fact that he personally symbolised the reform agenda, also promoted that the philosophy of PISA become an engine for reform and major factor in constructing a vision for the future.

As for the “*problems’ stream*”, the PISA 2000 survey could be interpreted as a “focusing event” that eventually reframed and forged together already existing ideas and policy incentives, strengthened the positions of certain advocacy groups and pushed problems reframed in front of the governmental gaze. The meaning of PISA was publicly formulated and constructed by political actors and a specific expert community which discovered the PISA-results as adequate for their aims and carried out the translation appropriate for their interpretation.

It is a more complex issue however, how the *idea stream*, alternatives and proposals to tackle the issues brought up by PISA took shape. Several idea flows had long been present in the field whose advocates became influential by 2002, whose knowledge was both shaped by international ideas

and determined by local scientific traditions. In the issue of tackling inequalities, critical sociology became influential in problem definition, a scientific stream whose origins could be traced back to the critique of state socialism when its primary mission was to reveal the underlying inequalities in a system that praised itself as one that had achieved equality. Governmental actions fabricated under the influence of this knowledge community primarily focused on the desegregation of schools and the replacement of misclassified children from remedial to mainstream education. The same sociologists however, were not inspired by those issues that concerned low achievement in general. Underachievement and the students lacking sufficient labour market skills were issues that rather mobilized educational scientists, mainly the members of the research community specialized in educational measurement; or reformist teachers, most of whom had been committed to alternative pedagogies. This explains that while the controversial, scandalous policy-story of educational desegregation and integration was accompanied by a relatively extensive public debate, discussions concerning educational quality remained further away from the public, and until 2007, it was also restricted to more of a professional and technical debate among a closed circle of educators.

What is sure, that the government program issued in May, 2002 already contained passages stating that the new government is committed to support incentives aiming at the reduction of social inequalities (with special focus on the socially disadvantaged, and the integrated education of Roma and SEN pupils). Thus we can conclude that PISA in itself did not trigger problem setting but helped to stabilize and legitimize the problem stream after establishing links between phenomena and ideas about solutions. This corresponds with the conclusion of Delvaux and Mangez (2008) who underline that comparison as a narrative device generally serves as a test of importance and accessibility at the stage of the formation of problem setting. PISA was an external factor, which did not allow in itself setting up a situation as a problem, and whose impact “depends on the prior establishment of links between problems, and especially of causal relations between problems widely accepted as such,

and situations that aspire to the status of problem” (Delvaux & Mangez, 2008, p. 75). In the following pages, we turn to the discussion of the bricolage of national policy-making, more precisely to the modes of translating international ideas and inventing local solutions and policy responses. This can only be carried out together with the careful analysis of the ways the PISA shock was discursively constructed.

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PISA DISCOURSE AND ITS SCENES

At a 2008 conference, the then Prime Minister presented the newer reform initiatives with the following words:

We have to decide: in which league do we want to play football? If in that of the developed countries, then we have to compare ourselves to them. (...) We lagged behind in formation and knowledge — and we cannot blame this on the Turks, the Germans or the Turanian curse<sup>4</sup> (F. Gyurcsány, quoted in *Népszabadság* 03/04/2008).

Our media analysis showed that in the mainstream political debate, PISA is embedded in the wider modernization narrative. In fact, the usage of the rhetoric of comparison divides those who use PISA as a legitimizing tool for change from those (be they as few as they are) who challenge the comparative-competitive narrative by traditionalist arguments. Although the “anti-comparatists” (first of all politicians and journalists from the conservative side) do not reject PISA as such, but they are more concerned with the disappearance of traditional values and canon from the school curriculum than by economic competitiveness. They see “modern” educational practices as mosaics of a larger picture of Westernization and consider them potential threats to the traditional values of the nation. They believe that decreased emphasis on transmitting factual knowledge or elements of the canon will turn the children into valueless and uniformized “consumer idiots”, therefore they criticise the mainstream interpretation of PISA and the policy solutions offered. Briefly, while those who use PISA as the evidence base for policy proposals

point at “the External Others” as comparators, traditionalists refer to “the Domestic Forefathers” (the Hungarian history, the ideals of classical education) as comparator.

TRANSLATION TO THE LOCAL DIALECT:

VOCABULARY ENTRIES QUALITY AND EQUITY

In order to understand the influence of PISA in the political domain, one should analyze the relations between the discursive level and the political actions carried out. Internationally PISA has provided diagnoses and put into the centre of attention two major domains: equity and quality. In Hungary, both of these were translated into problems calling for intervention. The diagnosis of PISA

regarding equity opened the grounds for the public re-discovery of the growing social segregation and selectivity in schools, while the low average scores of the pupils raised (not for the first time) serious doubts about the traditional lexical knowledge — and subject — orientedness of the curriculum and school work. In the media, as well as in the political speeches, these problems were quickly simplified to numbers: to the rank-order of Hungary in terms of students’ performance and to the proportion of the students’ performance explained by between school variance. The following table shows in what ways the problems and tools proposed by PISA got eventually translated to national problems and then to policy solutions.

TABLE 1  
PROBLEMS AND POLICIES ASSOCIATED WITH PISA (2001-2008)

INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON		DOMESTIC FABRICATION OF POLICIES THE ESTABLISHMENT OF LINKS BETWEEN PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS
Problems identified by PISA		Problems as framed in the domestic public discourse
Low quality	→ PISA 2000	<p>Too much lexical oriented content in the classrooms. Schools do not develop well the children’s basic skills and necessary competences</p> <p>Policy solutions put into practice with reference to PISA</p> <p>2003 — New competence-based Core Curriculum 2004 — Competence-based curricular packages, related in-service teacher training 2005 — Two-level, standardised graduation exam implemented, competence-based tasks are included 2008 — extension of the formal development of basic competences to the upper elementary grades (ISCED 2 — 5th and 6th grade)</p>
Low equity	→ PISA 2003  → PISA 2006	<p>Social and ethnic segregation, high selectivity due to the free school choice system</p> <p>↻</p> <p>2001 — National Assessment of Basic Competencies 2003 — the reduction of the amount of content material in primary schools (ISCED 1-2) the merge of small rural schools into larger urban institutions</p> <p>2003 — educational integration and desegregation policy + policies designed to address the overrepresentation of the Roma in remedial education 2005 — elimination of the entrance exam at 6-8 year elite secondary schools 2007 — restrictions on elementary school choice Settlements are required to write Equal Opportunity Plans 2008 — wage compensation for the teachers of the disadvantaged; early childhood compensatory programs</p>

A. Quality of teaching and learning: PISA and competence-basedness

After the publication of the first PISA results (Vári *et al.*, 2002), competence-development (especially reading competence) became a dominant issue in the Hungarian educational debates. The

government in office from 2002 to 2006 considered it primordial to speak against the overemphasis of factual knowledge in Hungarian schools. The minister repeatedly stressed in all the different forums (in the major daily papers, scientific journals, conferences, TV programs) that he considered this as

one of the greatest problems that caused the country's bad achievement. He did a lot for substantiating the belief that reducing the amount of text-book based learning material would lead to "better" and more "efficient" knowledge and that reading comprehension could be improved by leaving more time for developing competences. The war against traditional lexical-centered education became both a slogan and a mission for him.

Two main interconnected policy proposals emerged as possible solutions for enabling schools for a more efficient competence development strategy. Reducing teaching materials in elementary schools was present alongside with the plans to increase the length of the first phase of primary education from 4 years to 6 years. Reducing content material was a hot educational policy topic already in the mid-nineties, when the socialist-liberal government attempted to challenge the existing traditional structures of public education; nor was PISA the first educational measurement to generate a public debate about changing the structure of primary education. The topos of the overwhelmed students and arguments such as the excessive focus of the Hungarian, Prussian-style educational system on lexical knowledge, were already being discussed at the time. As a teacher from the audience of a professional round-table debate about PISA described:

From 1978 on, we have been talking constantly about reducing learning material in order to devote more time to the development of competences. And still, one should have a look at the text books and the curricula. We teach now much more in each subject than we did in 1978! (Schüttler, 2003, p. 63).

### *B. Equity: desegregation and integration*

The equity aspects of the PISA results were discovered as a powerful supporting tool by the newly appointed governmental actors in 2002 for reframing the discourse previously occupied with school failure. The official national PISA provided the government with an easily referenceable evidence base for their policy concepts. In their first report brief (Vári *et al.*, 2002), the authors clearly claim that the results show the effect of school segregation and the early selectivity of the educational system as well as the impact of the unfavourable consequences of the

low quality vocational education system. In an article published by the staff three years later (Balázsi *et al.*, 2005), the authors warn that the data show extremely high segregation between schools which reinforces the quality differences in schools, and they conclude that this is "the most important message of the two PISA measurements for the educational governance".

From 2003 a major policy-domain emerged on the policy agenda which reframed and forged together these issues into a comprehensive policy. This was the educational integration policy which aimed at the integration of the socially disadvantaged and the Roma children taught in segregated classes and in remedial education into the mainstream. It is always difficult to identify how PISA altered political action. In the case of equity issues, multiple streams of ideas and political circumstances induced political action eventually. The PISA results were one among these factors, and its rhetorical power was thoroughly exploited to legitimate highly controversial and conflicting policy objectives. PISA's equity concept formed a strange couple with the sociological paradigm in the policy discourse. The representatives of the *sociological policy paradigm* became influential after 2002. Their assumptions have been based on the findings of critical educational sociologists who worked on the reproduction of inequalities, social segregation and discrimination in schools for decades. PISA provided policy ready and a public friendly way to articulate their views, to advance and legitimize their case. The high speed of the stabilization of meanings is remarkable, and this stable meaning conveyance has only recently been diversified: basically, the political usage of the PISA study was restricted to the mantra-like repetition of the percentages indicating between school differences compared to the OECD average. The PISA diagnosis about between school variance and its vocabulary became integrated into the dialect of critical sociologists. To sum up, we consider that the political utterances about equal opportunities and educational integration, PISA is mainly used with the objective of symbolically integrating this specific policy domain on the one hand into wider systemic reform initiatives and on the other hand, into global narratives about the interdependence of equity in education and economic competitiveness.



In contrast, the scientific basis activated to justify in details the need for political action was predominantly drawn from domestic studies in sociology of education.

#### A SHORT NOTE ON POLICY SOLUTIONS

It has not been our intention to discuss PISA related Hungarian policy solutions in any further details here. However, it is important to mention that the remains of earlier institutionalized traditions and domestic regulatory reforms in part inspired by international traveling patterns got intermingled and the Hungarian educational regulatory system has become a patchwork of bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic regulation tools. It would be problematic to characterize this hybridity as clear patterns: the regulatory instruments are hardly aligned strategically and these instruments have rather accidental effects and are considerably shaped by the power relations at the local level.

#### CONCLUSION

Our paper addressed the question how the language and the message of PISA have been translated and customized to the Hungarian context, and consequently, how already existing ideas about the problems of public education got re-contextualized and reshaped in the narrative of PISA. The underperformance of the Hungarian educational system and its inequalities has become a central concern of public attention and a basic element of the discourse on education. The authority of PISA is not limited to the educational field: the PISA diagnosis repeatedly appears in the situation analysis of governmental strategic documents to underline the broad goals of development and the need for systemic change.

PISA obviously has become a constituent part of the social imagination about education, however the ways of translating OECD data into information decipherable for the domestic system have continuously been contested. The experts of the national PISA education board however keep arguing that a PISA shock has not taken place as PISA has not fertilized the scientific field on the one hand, and on the other hand, systemic reform in education and a thorough transformation of the norms of policy

making to evidence-basedness is still ahead. It could also be stated that PISA was overused by the 2002-2006 government. However, although the coalition stayed in office after the next elections in 2006, as the direction of the ministry was taken over by the socialist party, invocations of PISA on the side of the ministry became less frequent. Another possible reason why overarching reforms are still told to be missing lies in that conflicts escalated in the past decade between the major political groups. Consequently, it became impossible for the two big parliamentary parties as well as for the partners in the governing coalition to come to a strategic agreement about comprehensive educational reforms. Thus eventually there is no consensus about what the PISA means for Hungary as the appropriateness of the policies carried out in the wake of PISA remained contested from both the political actors' and scientific experts' side.

The PISA project as a new actor is playing a balancing role in this context as it pushed forward equity as a problem and evidence-basedness as an approach to policy-making in the domestic political horizon. While PISA somewhat faded away from the rhetoric of political actors, the public discourse on education policy has lately been increasingly articulated and shaped by scientific experts who invoking "scientific rationality" advocate for evidence-based reform. The discursive framework offered by the OECD language contributed to the rising influence of economics of education as expertise in informing policy-making. The accountability and efficiency approach of the *economic policy paradigm* frames the objectives attached to the school into the context of neo-liberal ideologies centered on freedom to choose. The economic policy paradigm is seemingly capable of reconciling various policy paradigms discussing educational failure: that of critical sociology, of educational measurement specialists and of advocates of early childhood compensatory programs.

The technicized nature of PISA, the scientization of politics have "replaced genuine public debates on the types of educational reforms that are suited for local communities" (Morgan, 2009, p. 12). According to Grek and Ozga, the strength of soft governance that PISA enacts lies in its strategy of regulation by numbers. As a result of the scientification of politics, "data now seem to be moving

into the place that might once have been occupied by policies or values” (Grek & Ozga, 2008, p. 3). At the same time, PISA also pushes forward a certain set of values and assumptions, namely it (re-)defines the problems of education from an economic angle arguing for strengthening the ties between schooling, labour market demands and economic competitiveness. The PISA discourse has lately become a master narrative for domestic education policy that embraces and neutralizes various other

voices and results in a univocal policy discourse. While at a supranational level, economists, statisticians, educational scientists voicing criticism are all invited to contribute to the fabrication of PISA and the dissemination of its results, in domestic lands, the PISA-discourse seemingly assimilates all other voices. The lack of counter narratives shows that in order to be heard and taken into account, everyone is requested to first master the vocabulary of the all-encompassing PISA narrative.

## ENDNOTES

1. The full report (Bajomi *et al.*, 2009) is available on the website of the KnowandPol project: <http://www.knowandpol.eu/index.php?id=257> (retrieved October 2009).

2. For more details on methodology see Bajomi *et al.*, 2009, pp. 9-11.

3. Steiner-Khamsi offers a classification of policy reactions to analyze the position taken among the nations: “scandalization”, “glorification” or “indifference”. In the case of Hungary, the PISA discourse seems to become striking in the contrast between PISA and previous international comparative student assessments. Whereas in the case of the IEA surveys, policy reactions tended to glorify the Hungarian students’ good results, in the case of PISA, while the below average results were at the first time under-communicated (“indifference”), the succeeding educational, government started to “scandalize” them.

4. Untranslatable mythological reference evoking the nationalistic and anti-Western discourse. According to this, the Hungarians are doomed to eternal inner hostilities which explain the dark Hungarian history.

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