

PISA and the policy debate in Scotland: policy narratives about Scottish participation in the international comparison

SOTIRIA GREK

sotiria.grek@ed.ac.uk

MARTIN LAWN

m.lawn@btinternet.com

JENNY OZGA

jenny.ozga@ed.ac.uk

University of Edinburgh, Scotland

ABSTRACT:

This paper examines the reception and use of PISA results in post-devolution Scotland (1999-2007). The pattern of participation constantly changes as the PISA cycle unfolds. In 2000 the UK took part as one country (the Scottish and English/Northern Irish results were analysed separately later); in 2003 England failed to reach the response levels required for its participation in the test, whereas Scotland did; and finally, in terms of the PISA 2006 results, both England and Scotland administered and participated in the study separately, but were still officially presented as “the UK”. The paper develops an analysis of interview material with policy actors in Scotland, with some comparative points from English policy actors, in relation to the reasons for participation in PISA and the reception and impact of the PISA results in Scotland. As the paper shows, the OECD has maintained its position as a trustworthy partner and is considered as the “gold standard” of international education research. Evidence presented on the PISA 2000-2006 cycle in Scotland graphically illustrates that PISA is important as reassurance in a system that, in contrast to England, does not have a massive testing regime throughout schooling — PISA indicates that the Scottish system is performing well. PISA has thus become an external validator of internal quality assurance processes. Further, PISA is also used as an arena for the promotion of Scotland as a separate and distinctive education system — and, by extension, a separate national presence in the international arena.

KEYWORDS:

PISA reception, Devolution, International comparison, Policy interviews, OECD.

GreK, Sotiria; Lawn, Martin & Ozga, Jenny (2009). PISA and the policy debate in Scotland: policy narratives about Scottish participation in the international comparison. *Sísifo. Educational Sciences Journal*, 10, pp. 73-84.

Retrieved [month, year] from <http://sisifo.fpce.ul.pt>

INTRODUCTION: PISA IN SCOTLAND AND THE COMPLEXITY OF DEVOLUTION

This paper focuses on the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and its role in framing and steering education policy in Scotland. It examines the ways in which the first PISA testing cycle (2000-2006) has entered the national policy space and has impacted upon it in ways that govern and shape education activity. More precisely, it builds on interview material with a range of policy makers in Scotland, conducted over the last year as part of a larger study of the impact of PISA as a knowledge regulation tool across a range of European countries, within the frame of the collaborative European research project “Knowledge and Policy in education and health sectors”, funded by the European Commission (6th Framework Programme — for more info and papers, see www.knowandpol.eu).

In order to study the policy debate around PISA in Scotland, one has to briefly discuss the politics of education in a devolved national context, where education has historically been recognised as playing a key role in the shaping and support of national identity (McCrone & Paterson, 2002; Paterson, 1997). Education has been one of the pillars of the “holy trinity” (Paterson, 1997) of Scottish institutions — Law and the Church being the others — that encapsulated Scotland’s “stateless nationhood” from 1707-1999. Thus prior to political devolution, education policy in Scotland was permitted a high

level of administrative separateness from education policy developments in the rest of the UK—for which the UK parliament and government at Westminster were responsible. So that even before political devolution and the (re) creation of a Scottish parliament in 1999, there was a legacy of “separate development” that was evidenced in different structures of provision, and, importantly in differences in testing regimes between Scotland and England. Constitutional change has brought added complexity to the policy process (Jeffrey, 2007). Scotland has a parliament with primary legislative powers and tax varying powers. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have different forms of devolution, and plans for English devolution have not progressed. The asymmetric nature of devolution, alongside the vagueness of the legislation which introduced the Scottish Parliament, has led to a complex policy environment (Arnott & Menter, 2007) in which to study the reception of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in the country.

If we review research on post devolution education policy before 2007 it highlights pressures for both convergence and divergence in policy across the UK (Arnott 2005; Arnott *et al.*, 2003; Humes & Bryce, 2003; Menter *et al.*, 2004; Raffe, 2005). The pressure for convergence comes from structural factors such as a shared UK labour market. In party political terms, convergent pressure followed from the fact that from 1999 until May 2007 the Labour Party was in power both in Scotland and at the UK level. From the establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999

until the second Scottish Parliament elections in May 2007 the Labour Party was the lead partner in a Labour/Liberal Democrat coalition. As a consequence there were common themes in education policy in both Scotland and England—themes such as choice, privatisation and standards (Arnott, 2005; Croxford & Raffe, 2007). These tended to be actively promoted by the Westminster UK government and reflected in policy in Scotland. However even with this close relationship there were divergences: policy texts in Scotland sometimes conveyed an uneasy blending of rather contradictory approaches: for example the “Ambitious Excellent Schools” programme (Scottish Executive, 2004) echoed English based reforms in its apparent support for the introduction of more diversity in provision but within a framework that stressed the centrality of the principle of comprehensive provision. In fact comprehensive provision remains the norm in Scotland, and the various City Academies, Faith Schools and Specialist Academies that characterise provision in England have not developed.

For the purposes of this paper, the key point is that the period we are investigating includes a period of shared party political control from 1999–2007 between both the relevant governments (ie Scotland’s and the UK’s) but with increasing pressure and tension between them. This situation contributes, we believe, to the differences we discuss below in relation to the reception and the policy debate around the PISA results. Put briefly, there is a shifting definition of the “unit” whose performance is being judged by PISA, and also, inevitably, about whose performance is being reported on or received. This shift reflects a changing politics, about which we say more below.

When we reach May 2007, the shared party political rule across the UK is disrupted by the election of a (minority) Nationalist government in Scotland. One of the key consequences of this, in terms of convergence and divergence in education policy, is that the new government sets out to build support through constant “referencing outward” to (what was then described as) the “arc of prosperity” of Nordic states, plus Finland, Iceland and Ireland. Leaving aside the consequences of the recent economic crisis, frequent reference to these selected states was intended to create an image of Scotland among them, looking like them, and with the same

levels of prosperity and social cohesion — an imagined community of the future (Anderson, 2003). This process also served to displace the historical “other” of England, that has been the reference point for so long — either in terms of “difference” or as a dominant, inescapable influence. This helps to explain the shifting terms in which PISA performance is described and debated in the period under review. It also points to a shifting definition of what is regarded as relevant knowledge, derived from PISA, in that there is a move from UK-focused knowledge about performance, with some inter-UK comparisons developing over time, to new definitions of relevant comparative knowledge.

To conclude, we suggest that the complexity of devolution is of additional value since we can observe the politics of comparison internationally but also within the UK itself. On the one hand, comparison with and reference to England as the significant “other” has been almost intrinsic to Scottish education policy-making for most of the 20th century, if only to underline difference. On the other, one can observe Scotland’s position as constantly changing as the PISA cycle unfolds: in 2000 the UK took part as one country (the Scottish and English/Northern Irish results were analysed separately later); in 2003 England failed to reach the response levels required for its participation in the test, whereas Scotland achieved them and took part; and finally, in terms of the PISA 2006 results, both England and Scotland administered and participated in the study separately, but were still officially presented as “the UK”. The OECD has been negotiating its way through this tricky territory by skilfully using reporting methods which, on the one hand, reflect the constitutional position and, on the other, are sensitive to the emergent intra-UK differences, thus reinforcing OECD’s position as a trustworthy partner for both governments and still the “gold standard” of international education research.

In the following section we present an analysis of interview data derived from a range of policy actors in Scotland and beyond, namely five members of the Information and Analytical Services (IAS) of the Scottish Government Schools Directorate; two senior politicians; three Members of the Scottish parliament (MSPs); one senior policy adviser; two members of the Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Education (HMIe);

and two senior government analysts in the Scottish Government. Further, we are also able to draw on interview data from relevant actors at the Department of Children, Schools and Families in England.

POLICY DEBATE: SOCIAL NETWORKS AND POLICY NARRATIVES

CONTEXT AND PISA ENTRY

The context of entry by the UK into PISA is one in which the New Labour government had just taken power, with a strong modernising agenda, and this is highly significant in understanding the reasons for participation. Modernisation of UK education policy tied education very firmly to the economy and involved a shift towards “implied consent” by the public to government’s problem-solving initiatives. These also required the widespread collection and use of data in order to enable the public to be informed, and the displacement of expert or professional judgement. Managerialism reinforced a technical and pragmatic approach to policy-making, driven by a calculus of economy and efficiency (Clarke *et al.*, 2000). In education policy-making these developments promoted integration (“joined up policy making”) and sought to involve new partners, particularly private partners (Jones, 2000). All of these policy initiatives were made possible by the production of performance data, and the construction of a system of performance management in which the relative positioning of schools, teachers and pupils can be tracked year on year. Data are therefore absolutely central as a knowledge form, and comparative data shape policy interventions. Thus the PISA entry is part of this development, but is rapidly overtaken by the sophistication of the data production system for statutory testing throughout schooling in England (Ozga, 2009).

Having this political background in mind, Scotland’s first participation in the PISA Programme was not decided independently but rather in close collaboration with England and Northern Ireland in 1997, as one national entity, the UK (Wales did not agree to participate fully in PISA until the 2006 study).

OECD — THE GOLDEN STANDARD OF INTERNATIONAL EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

Interviews with both English and Scottish policy actors stress OECD’s technical competence and expertise as best placed to deliver an internationally comparative study of the state of education systems in the industrialised nations and beyond. OECD is considered technically as the golden standard for conducting comparative studies like PISA: neither European agencies, nor other international organisations like the IEA, appear to our interviewees as having the expert capacity to deliver major comparative studies:

OECD comparisons tend to be more influential to us than discussions in Europe (CP3S).

I think [OECD] was just the obvious one and I’m not quite sure what other kind of standards they would have to judge Scotland compared to a comparative bunch of countries. It seems the obvious one to go for (CP1S).

I think it would be fair to say that PISA is top priority, in a sense, because it’s an OECD study. That, in itself, has given it a credibility that perhaps some other studies would have less of. The fact of it is it’s driven by the OECD (CP7S).

Apart from the technical expertise, interviewees suggested that the impartiality of an external assessment carries particular value, especially when it is accompanied by scientific rigour and a consistency in relation to countries’ positioning in each round of testing:

I spent a lot of time — an increasing amount of time — looking at PISA — because the OECD’s reputation was growing and these stats were reckoned to be good and reliable — a lot of rigour lying behind the system, it was difficult to cheat the system it would appear to be fair (though some countries might be working the system... by narrowing the curriculum). I saw presentations from OECD officials who took out Scotland results and looked at them and thought this was really interesting stuff—they could be objective, they’re coming from the outside, they’ve got no axe to grind (CP9S).

On the other hand, English and Scottish actors are aware of the extent to which PISA has been branded through marketing techniques by the OECD to such an extent that countries are willing to take part on the basis of the media attention it receives. This rather undercuts their emphasis on the superiority of the OECD in comparison to other international organisations in terms of technical expertise, and may reflect a shift in attitude over time — as the costs of PISA have become more apparent, so our informants may adopt a more critical approach to OECD’s “spectacle”. In this account, PISA’s acceptance is a result of OECD’s masterful techniques of persuasion, or, as one interviewee suggested, even “proselytization”:

I think PISA probably gets the most attention and that’s not because it is any more valid or reliable, it is simply because OECD has done such a brilliant marketing job with PISA. So it is a real brand name, ministers are familiar with it, politicians generally are familiar with it, the press, the education press and beyond are all familiar with PISA, whereas TIMMS etc they do not get the same amount of attention. (...) It is not at all reflection of the quality of the other studies, it is just that OECD has made a very good job of this. Andreas Schleicher travels the world prosyletizing PISA and has been very successful (CP2E).

COMPARISON AND COMPETITION

OECD’s stamp of the club of competitive nations in addition to the government’s direct association of improved educational performance with economic growth, were the two prime reasons for the participation of the UK in the study. English actors in particular emphasise comparison with other major economies as one of the main motives for entering into PISA, since other international studies (IEA’s TIMSS and PIRLS, for example), according to them, did not offer the same basis for comparison:

PISA was certainly the first large-scale international comparison study that would allow us to benchmark our performance against all of the world’s major economies. England and Scotland had both participated in IEA TIMSS in 1995 but the range of industrialised countries involved was not as complete as for PISA (CP2E).

This government’s main focus is economic growth and economic prosperity. With issues of solidarity and cohesion (...) too. So from that perspective obviously when you’re looking at your comparatives you start to think — well, what are you most interested in? You’re interested in countries that have successful economic strategies, that have economic growth (CP7S).

Above all comparison was key in the justifications for participation that actors gave: comparative knowledge is seen to be essential for the understanding of system performance (Jones *et al.*, 2008). OECD was able to offer a much greater spread of comparison, both for the more and the less successful education systems and hence economies.

PISA was described as “currency”: although its data are barely used, PISA recurs in discussions by many policy makers and in a sense has become the symbol of international commensurability. The appearance of Scotland in the OECD league tables might be all that Scotland “gets out” of PISA — but in the competitive global market, this could be of immense value:

I think that as long as we think it’s international comparisons (...). And the political importance of being able to say how well is Scotland doing in the world compared to other countries. And I think as long as there’s an appetite for that kind of comparison then something like PISA will be used because it has got this kind of gold standard tinge to it because of the OECD attachment. But, I mean, you might say that... is that the main thing we get from it. Is this kind of statement almost of — this is where you are? Possibly (CP7S).

Actors who use it appear as able to place the nation and their own ideas onto a global stage of competition and “cutting-edge” policy making. In the case of Scotland in particular, the emphasis to comparisons with competitor economies is explicit, since interviewees suggested that moving the lens out of Europe and into the world might be more beneficial in securing competitive advantage for future generations. Although European organisations offer comparisons within the continent, PISA delivers a more global perspective. Learning from “the

best” is crucial, even if in some cases these top performers have little idea about what they should be teaching:

The second thing that I was acutely conscious if you look at education internationally the economies of the world have been globalised. This has profound implications for any individual system — your kids have got to be competitive in a global market. You see it in the European context very clearly with people moving around the European Union. So we had to know what was going on in the rest of the world so that we could judge the crucial skills our kids were going to need in the modern economy. Were we losing pace? What did we have to think about to address the deficits that were likely to arise? And PISA was an insight into that. And quite a powerful insight (CP9S).

On the other hand, some interviewees did not share the same degree of confidence in relation to the significance of PISA for Scotland. One interviewee in particular said that in a review of all international assessment programmes by the Scottish government, there was some consideration about the possibility of the country withdrawing from the Programme. The main reasons for this was its small contribution to knowledge about the system and the significant burdens regarding assessment placed on schools, as they became evident in 2003 in England and in 2006 in Scotland:

I think there was a ... it was a huge commitment to resource ... and in terms of personnel and I think, not just that, but the key point that we were coming from ... not we, I mean, we're talking about Scotland ... that it's in terms of schools that it's quite a burden on schools. I mean, schools are already doing a number of things and they're already involved in the assessment achievement programme (CP5S).

PISA ADMINISTRATION: CHALLENGES

Indeed, given that both the Scottish and to a much greater degree the English systems are highly demanding on schools in terms of continuous monitoring and assessment, reaching the desired response rates for every PISA round appears to be as a

major problem for both countries. Some narratives are so telling, that they could explain the reasons for a relative apathy when the results are published; so much energy has been spent in making the test actually “happen”, that when the results are published, rather than studying them, actors feel despondent that they have to start with another marathon of securing schools’ participation in the next round. In the case of the following quotation from an English policy maker, we even witness internal UK competition — not about the results but surprisingly about reaching the required response rate! Reading about incentives for schools in England makes also for another striking PISA “story”:

We have succeeded and we have succeeded because we gave schools 500 quid up front and 500 quid afterwards to pay for supply teachers that displaced time with their science coordinator, which is what it was because this was the major domain. The strategy managers in local authorities [had] to act as advocates. We got permission to move the testing window away from spring because it is the time for the GCSE preparations and sort of drift off at the end of summer term to move it to the autumn term when things are quieter and, you know, between these measures it worked. And it is a really dramatic improvement, 64% to 86%, something like that. You know, very dramatic, very sort of dramatic that we've made that. Well, I suppose if schools were really, really overwhelmed... (CP5E).

Scotland faced similar problems with achieving numbers, although the problem might not have been quite so acute, despite of the fact that incentivisation was not used as a strategy:

Response rates have been an absolute nightmare. For 2006 if you look very closely at the response rates you will see that we just about made it. In fact in one interpretation we didn't (CP7S).

In Scotland we have no persuasive power other than it will be nice if you did it. Essentially. We don't fund them to do it, we don't pay schools to do it, we don't fund local authorities to do it, we don't give feedback at local level because it is not reliable data at local level. We have started looking at the possibility of giving them attitudinal feedback at the local level, so

we would say this is the general feedback of pupils' attitudes (CP10S).

According to the same interviewee, there is always a degree of uncertainty and risk, since unforeseen circumstances and last minute withdrawals could mean exclusion from the test:

There were some specific problems during the test period for PISA 2006 which very nearly led to disaster. In March 2006 there was a period of severe bad weather which led to the closure of schools in much of northern Scotland, including PISA schools. Towards the end of the test period there was also an industrial dispute which involved school janitorial and other ancillary staff. This also led to the temporary closure of some schools, and affected others (for example, some schools were unable to set up examination rooms for the PISA testing). Testing was delayed in quite a number of schools, though did eventually take place in them all (CP10S).

Other challenges to those administering the PISA tests have been the administrative and logistical challenges they present, alongside their highly bureaucratic and mechanistic character that leaves very little space for local adaptation:

The role of the National Project Manager (NPM) within PISA is largely administrative and logistical: there is very little scope for any individual input. All the major decisions about the test materials, processes and procedures are made either by the international consortium or the PISA Governing Board, and the national centres are left with the task of making the necessary minor adaptations, organising the testing and delivering the results. (...) PISA is also an incredibly bureaucratic enterprise: there are forms and manuals for everything, many of which are complex and confusing. This applies not only to the many forms, questionnaires and reports which the national centres have to produce, but also to those who are organising and conducting the tests within the schools (CP10S).

Finally, there have been problems with definitions, especially in the case of scientific literacy in the last round, as well as problems with the interpretation of the results:

Much of the discussion about PISA fails to address the issue of what it is actually measuring. It is not just scientific knowledge (however defined), but also attitudes to science, and the value placed on science. There is rarely any discussion of the various sub-scales which are reported by PISA, rather it is often simply assumed that a good PISA score equals "good at science" and it is by no means as simple as that (CP10S).

USE AND CAPITALISATION OF THE RESULTS

In terms of the use of PISA findings in Scotland, interviewees suggested that it is difficult to be clear about what use is made of the PISA findings within the Scottish government, by either politicians or policy makers:

They are always, of course, glad to have any evidence to support what they see as Scottish "success", but the ways that they use it formulate policy remain mysterious. Equally there are always others who are glad to have what they see as evidence of "failure" (CP10S).

However, there are a number of more implicit uses evident in the ways PISA is used within the nation. First, although comparison with the best is still considered a very significant factor, Scottish participation is mainly justified on the basis that, through PISA, Scotland acquires a role in the international education policy stage as a separate entity (from the UK/England):

The value lay on the ability of Scotland, Scottish ministers to play in an international stage, rather than the relevance to policy and practice. (...) And sort of make contacts (CP8S).

I think that as long as we think it's international comparisons (...). And the political importance of being able to say how well is Scotland doing in the world compared to other countries (CP7S).

But I think it's partly about you know this is putting Scotland on the map. We do quite well in PISA so what more can we extract from that by way of evidence on our position in the world (CP1S).

Thus PISA enables Scotland as a system to be visible. Moreover, given that there is and was a relatively high degree of confidence in the performance of the education system, the participation was not seen as risky — Scotland could gain visibility and kudos on the international stage. The actors based in England did not make such comments about participation in the international policy arena, a point that may be related to the development in England of a massive complex performance testing machine, which provided reliable system performance knowledge. Furthermore, the UK/England system actors were confident of their visibility and “place” on the international stage.

Therefore, as long as the results remain fairly positive, PISA’s influence in Scotland is like that of a meteor: despite causing some ripple effects and few discussions, and possibly a couple of media headlines as well, PISA is a spectacle that as quickly as it illuminates the nation, with an equal speed it is forgotten and passed by:

It’s mainly been used so far to measure... to basically say — where does Scotland exist in the world compared to other countries. (...) We have come fifth, twelfth, whatever. That’s been the main use, is that kind of idea of measurement. And then the idea of measurement just as an overall — there’s where we are, and the other thing, I suppose, is using it to analyse different levels of achievement (CP7S).

Moreover, since Scotland does not have such a testing-driven culture based on individual data for every pupil as is the case in England, PISA was described in several instances as “a pat on the back”, or as a “reassurance”, or another piece of evidence thrown “into the pot”:

They’re also slightly political in a pat on the back sense where — look, haven’t we done well. You know. Scotland is up here in the top ten or whatever. And government has certainly used it very much in that perspective as well (CP7S).

To conclude, PISA is used primarily by the Scottish Government as a reference point for the country’s global positioning and performance in comparison to other nations. Above all, according

to one interviewee, former minister and supporter of OECD research in Scotland, PISA disrupts complacency. Scotland participates in PISA knowing that it will get a fairly positive profile of its education system — it is in the critical remarks and problems that it counts more on:

The standard speech from me is — we are strong internationally — how do I know that? — PISA tells me and PISA is reliable — but be very clear — we’re not that strong and unless we change and develop and move forward all these other countries round about us who are investing in education and looking at science and technical skills and maths — will overtake us. And if they overtake us what does that mean? It means that our kids are potentially less marketable than theirs are in a global economy — we can’t have that, so we’ve got to change. In that context PISA gives a very important reference point (CP9S).

CONCLUSIONS

Our interviewees suggested that PISA reinforces Scotland’s distinctiveness (from England) by providing knowledge about the performance of the system that can be used internally (in the UK) to resist pressures (from the UK government) for more testing and for the publication of individual test results on a national comparative basis. PISA represents a complex new strategy based on international comparisons that enables and renews the Scottish tradition of balancing data and numbers with the distinctive Scottish approach of self-evaluation and independent judgement by experts (especially the Inspectorate) of thought, but on a global stage; this is congruent with the parallel development of Scotland securing recognition at the European level through the “branding” of self-evaluation (in the “How good is our school?” model — HMIe, 2002, 2007) which has been taken up as a “travelling policy” (Alexiadou & Jones, 2001) for over a decade. In this case PISA results are interpreted locally as reaffirming local and traditional (or embedded) policy and educational knowledge production. This may be interpreted as exemplifying Alexiadou and Jones’s (2001) discussion of “travelling” and “embedded” policy; in which travelling policy refers to

supra and transnational agency activity, as well as to common agendas (for example for the reshaping of educational purposes to develop human capital for the information age). Embedded policy is to be found in “local” spaces, (which may be national, regional or local) where global policy agendas come up against existing priorities and practices. This perspective allows for recognition that, while policy choices may be narrowing, national and local assumptions and practices remain significant and mediate or translate global policy in distinctive ways. In the case of Scotland, the need to appear on the international stage helps to explain why the country is willing to spend substantial amounts of money, to secure through very stressful and uncertain conditions the required response rates and — often *just* — manage to participate, although it does very little, if not absolutely nothing, with the findings.

The UK framework within which Scotland is located is significant in the narrative here. The justification and purpose of UK entry in 1997 is connected to the incoming New Labour UK government’s determination to reform public sector provision and improve the performance of the education system as a way on ensuring competitive advantage. As the UK government becomes more and more determined to manage performance, and more and more sophisticated in developing monitoring systems in England, so the significance of PISA for the UK/England system may decline. At the same time, as Scotland diverges increasingly from UK/English education policy, so too does the significance of PISA for Scotland increase. In the first place it is important as reassurance that without a massive expansion of testing its system is performing well: it is an external validator of internal quality assurance processes. In the second place it becomes an arena for the promotion of Scotland as a separate and distinctive education system (and, by extension, a separate national presence in the international arena). This latter function becomes more important as internal UK politics become more divisive.

PISA appears to occupy an important symbolic space and to establish significance *without* being backed up by extensive analyses or in-depth discussions of its content. Its production seems to centre on a ritual of participation that does not offer many opportunities for real debate and input from the

national level. But this is not experienced by Scotland’s actors as a significant issue. Provided they are there, and provided that PISA is successful — a “pat on the back” as one interviewee put it, it serves its purpose. In other words, PISA’s most dominant use in Scotland is discursive; it appears and re-appears whenever a debate takes place in which statements or judgements need to be backed by some justification, argumentative or evidentiary support of an “international research” nature. As an interviewee succinctly summarised it, it provides *a reference point* for a small, peripheral nation like Scotland, attempting to escape from the shadow of the “other”, England, both in the immediate context and beyond.

Above all, in Scotland and beyond, PISA has pushed transnational education governance, or Europeanization processes for that matter, through a significant transformation: the “international” arena of monitoring of system performance used to be in most cases an event that took place behind “closed-doors”, involving only national representatives at the EU level, benefiting from their special information sources, in order to strategically influence domestic policy. In effect, it represented an instance of “high” politics, that is a closed event involving important people who worked together to protect and enhance their individual interests. Now, in contrast, we confront international education comparisons as a *public issue*, where national performance and its international standing have come into centre stage. In this new realm, more diverse actors, such as policy makers, the media, teachers’ unions, academics, and even pupils themselves, have come to participate in an event which conceptualises education not merely as within a national arena but as part of a global, inter-connected world.

OECD, through its history in developing international education indicators and comparisons, and crucially through its careful and thorough orchestration of a test on such an enormous scale, has become the “obvious” international organisation to trust and choose in promoting national policy at the global arena. The promotion of the national within the international sphere of comparison also raises issues about the ordering of significance of nations. Thus we suggest that the specific case of Scotland shows the ways that a nationalist government may

draw systematically on the “international” in order to reinforce its local cause, but it is also redrawing its relations (for example by looking to Poland or Lithuania) in order to benefit from the new interest in what was the periphery of Europe. Old national borders in Europe thus gradually lose their former status (the UK) and local policies and choices appear as flexible, intelligent and more networked than ever before. In this context, policy learning broadens its scope from the imposition or promotion of ideas by the putative “centre”, and becomes, perhaps, more uncontrolled, more open, and more volatile.

However, the fact that Scotland is relatively successful in PISA has to be taken into account here. There is a symbiotic relationship between PISA and the education system: Scotland needs PISA and PISA needs cases like Scotland — cases of nations that have positive performance but could and should, according to the official (both OECD and Scottish) discourse, improve more quickly and more efficiently. OECD provides a “spectacle” of recognition that comes with high levels of visibility and reputation. At the same time, it offers critical comments that can act as leverage for further reform. One could speculate that the Scottish model of policy making at the international stage (which of course includes work with both the EU and the OECD as

well as other multi-lateral or bilateral international cooperations) is one of pushing innovative ideas abroad, in order for them to eventually return to the domestic as necessary reform measures, backed with global credence and “robust” evidence. Policy teaching and learning are not in any way separate or dichotomous strategies in this model: they operate together, simultaneously, in a complex mix of policy actors’ and evidence data inter-relationships and dependencies.

To conclude, the production of PISA provides little evidence of attention to its content and to the problems of construction of comparative assessment. The process is ritualistic and symbolic. By these means the local policy actor signals, to an international audience, through PISA, the adherence of their nation to reform agendas (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004), and thus joins the club of competitive nations. As already suggested, this is especially important for a small, peripheral nation, attempting to model other small, successful nations. However this process may not be directly “convergent”, as we have seen; it may, indeed, produce new “centre-periphery” relations. In this perspective, as Appadurai (1996) argues, we can recognise “vernacular globalisation” in which there is change and reconfiguration not just in or from the global but in global, national and local interrelationships.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

- ALEXIADOU, N. & JONES, K. (2001). Travelling Policy/Local Spaces. Paper to the *Congrès Marx International III Paris*, September 2001.
- ANDERSON, B. (2003). *Imagined Communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. London: Verso.
- APPADURAI, A. (1996). *Modernity at large: cultural dimensions of globalisation*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- ARNOTT, M. A. (2005). Devolution, Territorial Politics and the Politics of Education. In G. MOONEY & G. SCOTT (eds.), *Exploring Social Policy in the 'New' Scotland*. Bristol: Policy Press, pp. 239-262.
- ARNOTT, M. & MENTER, I. (2007). The same but different? Post-devolution regulation and control in education in Scotland and England. *European Educational Research Journal*, 6, 3, pp. 250-265.
- ARNOTT, M. A.; MARTIN, J.; McKEOWN, P. & RANSON, S. (2003). *Volunteer Citizens: The Governance of Schooling in the UK* ESRC Final Report, Democracy & Participation Research Programme.
- CLARKE, J.; GEWIRTZ, S. & McLAUGHLIN, E. (eds.) (2000). *New Managerialism, New Welfare?* London: Sage.
- CROXFORD, L. & RAFFE, D. (2007). Education Markets and Social Class Inequality: a comparison of trends in England, Wales and Scotland. In R. Teese (ed.), *Inequality Revisited*. Berlin: Springer, pp. 39-66.
- HM INSPECTORATE OF EDUCATION (2002). *How good is our school? Self-evaluation using quality indicators*. Edinburgh: HMI.
- HM INSPECTORATE OF EDUCATION (2007). *How good is our school? — The Journey to Excellence*. Part 3. Retrieved July 2009 from <http://www.hmie.gov.uk/hgios/hgios.asp>; <http://www.hmie.gov.uk/documents/publication/hmie%20report%20final%202005c.pdf>
- HUMES, W. M. & BRYCE, T. G. K. (2003). The Distinctiveness of Scottish Education. In T. G. K. BRYCE & W. M. HUMES (eds.), *Scottish Education: Post Devolution*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 98-110.
- JEFFREY, C. (2007). The Unfinished Business of Devolution: Seven Open Questions. *Public Policy and Administration*, 22, 1 pp. 92-108.
- JONES, K. (2000). Partnership as Strategy: public-private relationships in the Education Action Zones. *British Educational Research Journal*, 26, 5, pp. 565-582.
- JONES, K.; CUNCHILLOS, C.; HATCHER, R.; HIRRT, N.; INNES, R.; JOSHUA, S. & KLAUSENITZER, J. (2008). *Schooling in Western Europe: the New Order and its Adversaries*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.
- MCCRONE, D. & PATERSON, L. (2002). The Conundrum of Scottish Independence. *Scottish Affairs*, 40, pp. 54-75.
- MENTER, I.; MAHONEY, P. & HEXTALL, I. (2004). Ne're the Twain Shall Meet? Modernising the Teaching Profession in Scotland and England. *Journal of Education Policy*, 19, 2, pp. 195-214.
- OZGA, J. (2009). Governing education through data in England: from regulation to self-evaluation. *Journal of Education Policy*, 24, 2 (March), pp. 149-162.
- PATERSON, L. (1997). Policy-Making in Scottish Education: A Case of Pragmatic Nationalism. In M. CLARKE & P. MUNN (eds.), *Education in Scotland: Policy and Practice From Pre-School to Secondary*. London: Routledge, pp. 138-155.
- RAFFE, D. (2005). Devolution and Divergence in Education Policy. In J. ADAMS & K. SCHMUECHER (eds.), *Public Policy Difference Within the UK*. Newcastle: IPPR, pp. 52-69.
- SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE (2004). *Ambitious Excellent Schools: our agenda for action*. Edinburgh: Scottish Executive.
- STEINER-KHAMSI, G. (2004). *The Global Politics of Educational Borrowing and Lending*. Columbia: Teachers College Press.

