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Domestication of International Comparisons

The role of the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in Finnish education policy

ACADEMIC DISSERTATION
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Social scientists have long been fascinated by the dynamics of global change, asking by what actors or factors it is driven. Researchers have likewise asked what the outcomes of these processes are. Although the scholarly community has arrived at no stable consensus regarding these subjects, if indeed this is at all possible, many researchers nevertheless seem to share the assumption that processes of change in one country are dependent on developments in other countries, i.e. in their policymaking national governments adopt models from other countries, and also make multilateral agreements. This dissertation is the outcome of such deliberations, of a desire to learn why it is that nation-states opt for the same policy solutions and what role international organisations and their knowledge production play in these processes.

In 2006 an Academy of Finland-funded project began, its aim being to shed light on the forms and dynamics of the interaction between nation-states and international organisations in the present era of increasing interdependence between countries throughout the world. More specifically, the project focused on the role of the OECD in driving global social change. In this research project entitled *Knowledge Production, Power, and Global Social Change: The Interplay between the OECD and Nation-States* I began my work as a PhD student.

The OECD and its role in global governance became our research object because, although obviously the organisation wields no legal power over its member countries, through the evaluation information it disseminates it would appear to exert considerable influence in the justifications evinced for political decisions at national level. On our project we therefore decided to study the OECD’s ability to produce forms of knowledge that frame social reality which is applied in various ways at the national level to justify or criticise local politics and policies, thus also establishing new policies or practices. To narrow down the vast scope and ambitious objectives of the research we concentrated particularly on the bearing of the OECD on one member country only, namely Finland. Moreover, because of the broad range of policy areas in which the OECD operates and makes recommendations to its member countries, we decided to concentrate on a few OECD special projects. On the basis of selected case studies highlighting different ways in which the OECD figures at the national level, the aim of the project was to construct a more general model of the types of influence that international organisations exert in
global social change. One of the cases selected was the OECD PISA Study (Programme for International Student Assessment) and its role in Finnish education policy. This became my part in the project.

In my dissertation, I approached the question bottom-up by analysing how different interest groups or stakeholders in Finland invoked PISA when discussing the state of national education. I focused particularly on the uses made of PISA by the Finnish teaching profession and the officials in Finnish central government. In addition, I studied the national PISA coverage, i.e. the ways in which PISA has been discussed and thus constructed in the Finnish media. By referring to these uses I aimed show how the ideas conveyed by PISA became integrated into the national education policy discourse, thereby affecting Finnish education policy.

With PISA and its role in the national education debate as my research object I believe I was extremely fortunate. Not because Finland did very well in the assessment of these learning outcomes, but because PISA, in spite of the nation-state and its ranking, would appear to be on the lips of anyone interested in education. Due to this wide public interest aroused by PISA nationally and internationally I had ample material from which to choose and which to reflect on in my endeavours to study the role of the OECD in the global social change.

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This dissertation came to fruition with the generous support and help of fellow researchers and others close to me. I wish to extend special thanks to the supervisor of my dissertation, Academy Professor and project leader Pertti Alasuutari, who, when the project on the possible influence of the OECD started up in 2006, as the researcher in charge of the project included me in it. His unreserved interest in my work and willingness to read and comment my text has done much to make the dissertation what it is today. His supervision also served as a useful basis for many other co-authored works through which our co-operation continues to flourish to this day. Nothing could excel the supervision and co-operation from which I have benefitted and which I hope may continue in the future.

I also want to thank the many research groups and projects with which it has been my pleasure to co-operate. I want to thank researchers Antti Tietäväinen and Ari Rasimus for being my sounding boards on our common OECD project. I am also much indebted to Professor Alasuutari’s other Academy-funded project, The Moderns: A Study on the Governmentality of World Society, whose members became my close friends. I am particularly grateful to Laura Valkeasu, Elina Mikola and Jukka Syväterä
whose sincere friendship and whole-hearted support prompted me to complete this dissertation. I want to thank the entire TCuPS group (Tampere Research Group for Cultural and Political Sociology) which came into being later around all projects of which Professor Alasuutari is in charge in order to scrutinize among others power and politics in today’s societies. I am particularly grateful to Jari Luomanen, Virve Peteri, Pekka Rantanen, Matti Kortesoja, Lauri Lepistö, Ali Qadir, Mirka Räisänen, Leena Tervonen-Gonçalves, Tatiana Tiaynen, Valtteri Vähä-Savo and Li Wang, whose constructive comments in the group have helped me to improve my texts. I am also grateful to the Helsinki Group for Political Sociology (HEPO) with whose members I as a TCuPS member have been able to collaborate. I extend my special thanks to Karin Creutz, Peter Holley, Markku Lonkila and Risto Alapuro who have shown their unreserved interests in my research work. Regarding the research work I also want to thank the entire TaSTI staff (Research Centre for Knowledge, Science, Technology and Innovation Studies) which whom I have shared offices physically and intellectually many thoughts on the role of scientific knowledge in contemporary societies. I want to express my thanks particularly to my female colleagues Marja Alastalo, Reetta Muhonen and Pia Vuolanto, whose warm presence has brought so much joy to my working days.

I gratefully acknowledge the official reviewers of my dissertation, Professor Francisco O. Ramirez and Professor (Emeritus) Ari Antikainen, whose statements helped me to improve the manuscript in the final stages. I want to thank Mrs Virginia Mattila for her tremendous help in revising the language of all texts forming part of this dissertation. I am also grateful to Mrs Sirpa Randell for editing the manuscript into its final form. I also wish to thank the officials working in the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture and in the Finnish National Board of Education, not only for being the informative interviewees in my case studies also gave of their time and shared with me their views on PISA.

For funding my research I gratefully acknowledge the support of the Academy of Finland-funded project Knowledge Production, Power, and Global Social Change: The Interplay between the OECD and Nation-States’. Additionally, I much appreciate the financial support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland in the preparatory phase of the OECD research project. Finally, I am grateful for the financial support I have received from the School of Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Tampere to complete my dissertation.

Finally I wish to thank my dear family and friends for supporting me during this project. I am grateful to my parents, Paula and Kauko, and to my parents-in-law, Marjut and Martti and their partners, for having always supported me in my endeavours, including academic ones, and for providing high-quality child care throughout this process. My three sisters, Susanna, Johanna and Kristiina, have always been important
in keeping my spirits up. I also want to thank all my friends for accompanying me along the road to my dissertation. Last but not least I want to thank my dear husband Juuso and my two lovely children, Madeleine and Kristian, for all the love, care and patience that have helped me to put research in the right perspective. In all that I have done your presence and the time spent with you has been invaluable.

On a clear day in Tampere, October 2013.

Marjaana Rautalin
ABSTRACT

This dissertation is concerned with the discussion in Finland on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) implemented by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and so on the role of PISA in Finnish education policy. Special attention is paid in the study to analysing the references made by the Finnish teachers as a professional body and the civil servants of central government in their deliberations on the strengths and weaknesses of the national education system and in their legitimisation of solutions in education policy both implemented and advocated. The study moreover scrutinises the effect of the media coverage of PISA on our conception of the state of Finnish school education and so also the decisions taken in Finnish education policy. By examining the use made of PISA locally I endeavour to examine the role played by the OECD in Finnish education policy. It is my assumption that if PISA can be seen to have been evoked in the defence of decisions already taken and in calling for reforms, then the OECD does indeed have a role in national education policy.

In examining the discussion on PISA at national level and its possible implications for Finnish education policy, my aim has been also to participate in the wider theoretical debate contemplating the dissemination of global policy models and the effects of such models on solutions adopted in national policy. In contrast to the approaches in the existing literature, the work at hand approaches the phenomena from the perspective of how local actors exploit their understanding of functioning and therefore desirable systems when considering the state of their own respective systems and how this then serves to propagate global policies. I contend that the evaluation information proffered by the OECD, such as what PISA conveys to us, is one of the main devices by means of which various actors in national contexts become aware of the state of the systems in their own respective countries and of how their own system is positioned in relation to other systems evaluated. Such rankings also serve to disseminate notions of desirable systems and are taken on board by national contexts, with the result that national policies are synchronised with global trends. However, this local adoption of global policy ideas is not about of ritual enactment. If anything, I claim, in these processes, where domestic actors make use of international comparative data to develop their own systems, actors’ own political desires are always also involved. Local actors do not just
react to exogenous policy models in order to promote the best interests of their own country. If anything, they resort to international comparative data to further their own objectives in domestic politics. Through considered rhetoric local players direct their fellow citizens’ attention to policies in use in other countries or to practices already existing in their own country’s context, thus constructing distinct models or presenting evidence of their success. Through these local accounts, global policy ideas mesh with the interest and motives of the local actors whereby the exogenous origin of the idea originally put forward in the global context disappears and they become to be seen primarily as domestic. The new policy may even be considered a characteristic feature of the nation and promoted to other countries, hence reproducing the cycle of global social change.

The dissertation is presented in sections such that the introductory chapter presents a review of the existing literature on the subject, the main research objective of the work and the research question, the formation of the study and various case studies and the main findings of the dissertation, the second chapter is a case study of the aspirations of the Finnish teaching profession to use PISA and the Finnish rankings with a view to safeguarding their professional interests in the future national discussion on education. The third chapter enumerates how Finnish civil servants in central government have made reference to PISA when defending decisions already taken or foreshadowing new developmental directions. The concluding chapter considers the media coverage of the Finnish PISA rankings and the effects of this publicity on the news coverage of other (related) matters in Finland and so on education policy decisions taken in Finland.

The theoretical-methodological approach adopted in this work is marked constructionist. The empirical analyses rely specifically on the concept of discourse as in Foucault and the analysis of rhetoric as in Perelman. The theoretical frame of reference of the work relies heavily on policy diffusion theories, above all new institutionalist world polity -theory and studies making use of this. However, this theoretical frame of reference is complemented in this dissertation with the domestication frame of reference; framework that opens up the actual processes and practices through which international comparisons infiltrate national spheres thereby affecting domestic policies.

It emerged from my dissertation that the OECD is not a true actor in Finnish education policy. In light of the discoveries made in the case studies I claim that influence exerted by the OECD invariably takes place by way of the national arena, in other words, by way of those field battles to which PISA gave rise in Finland and in which each negotiating party has sought to safeguard its own interests in the national education debate in the future. For example, the case study elucidating the ways in which the teachers accounted for PISA showed that the teachers involved PISA primarily
in order to emphasise the productivity of their own work and professional training, although this professional group also expressed development requirement vis-à-vis the central administration, the rationale being to ensure successful outcomes in future evaluations of learning. The Finnish civil servants for their part made the interpretation that PISA was proof positive of the excellence of the policy mounted by the central administration and in calling for changes they directed these mainly at actors outside the central administration, such as the Finnish schools and municipalities.

In addition to exerting influence on Finnish education by initiating debate in the national context, PISA, as the dissertation demonstrates, exerted influence further by also structuring those discussions in which it is possible to talk about Finnish education. In addition to this, PISA affects through the discourses it establishes and the terms it employs. The case studies showed among other things that when, through PISA, the conception of Finnish education and Finnish education policy as successful and consistent has taken firm root in society, the decisions on reforms of education policy taken by the central administration did not meet with any critical reception in the national public, as a result of which the civil servants were free to continue uninterrupted with the reform of the national curriculum which they deemed necessary. That is, as PISA did not constitute any serious cause for criticism, the media made no mention of the actions of governmental officials, thereby leaving the officials and decision-makers free to continue their reform work uninterrupted. This finding emerged especially in the analysis of the news coverage of PISA and its effects on Finnish education policy.

Having examined the local uses made of PISA in the Finnish context, and so also the role of PISA in Finnish education policy, I venture to claim something about the mechanisms through which international organisations like the OECD exert influence over national education policies. Rather than perceiving the OECD to be dictating national education policies and the future directions these should take, in light of the findings from my case studies, I would contend that the organisation exerts its influence on national education systems by shaping our conceptions of what is a desirable policy in the international perception and how this can be achieved. However, this is not the same as claiming that having been approved and so assimilated in the international context, the OECD through PISA is harmonising national policies. Rather it would appear that the OECD is synchronising these. As this and other research has demonstrated, nation-states would appear to have reacted to PISA and the results it provided simultaneously, albeit that in the respective countries the interpretations of PISA would appear to be highly diverse. Indeed, I would claim that due specifically to the national arm-wrestling arising from PISA, nation-states have decided to adopt very different policy solutions. In these processes, in which international evaluation information becomes a part of national policy discourses and practices, I suggest, that
national policies become synchronised with each other, but still in such a way that the conception of the national systems as something authentic and catering to national needs survives unchanged.

sissa konteksteissa, globaalit ideat tavoitelluista koulutusjärjestelmistä leviävät ja sekoittuvat kansallisten intressien kanssa.


Sen lisäksi, että Pisa vaikuttaa suomalaiseen koulutukseen laukaisemalla keskustelua kansallisessa kontekstissa, tutkimus osoitti, että se vaikutaa siihen myös strukturoiduilla niitä keskustelujen, joiden puitteissa suomalaisesta koulutuksesta voidaan
puhua. Tämän lisäksi Pisa vaikuttaa vakiinnuttamiensa diskurssien ja asiasanojen kautta. Tapaustutkimukseni osoittivat mm sen, että kun Pisa:n myötä kansalliseen julkisuuteen oli juurtunut käsitys suomalaisesta koulutuksesta ja koulutuspolitiikasta onnistuneena ja johdonmukaisena, keskushallinnon tekemät koulutuspoliittiset uudistukset eivät nousseet kriittisessä mielessä kansalliseen julkisuuteen, minkä seurauksena virkamiehet pystyivät jatkamaan tarpeelliseksi kokemaansa valtakunnallista opetussuunnitelma- uudistusta keskeytyksettä. Tämä löydös tuli esille erityisesti suomalaisesta Pisa-uutisointia ja sen implikaatioita eritelleessä tapaustutkimuksessa.

# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FNBE</td>
<td>Finnish National Board of Education</td>
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<td>EU</td>
<td>European Union</td>
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<td>IEA</td>
<td>International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement</td>
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<td>IFI</td>
<td>International financial institution</td>
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<td>IGO</td>
<td>International governmental organisation</td>
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<td>IMF</td>
<td>International Monetary Fund</td>
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<td>IO</td>
<td>International organisation</td>
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<td>NAFTA</td>
<td>North American Free Trade Alliance</td>
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<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-governmental organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>OAJ</td>
<td>Opetusalan Ammattijärjestö (In English: Trade Union of Education in Finland)</td>
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<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development</td>
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<td>OEEC</td>
<td>Organisation for European Economic Cooperation</td>
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<tr>
<td>PISA</td>
<td>Programme for International Student Assessment</td>
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<td>WTO</td>
<td>World Trade Organization</td>
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LIST OF ORIGINAL ARTICLES

This dissertation is based on the following original articles.

Article I

Article II

Article III

This article is a book chapter and has been accepted for a publication in an international edited book: ‘National Policy-making: Domestication of Global Trends’. The volume is edited by Pertti Alasuutari and Ali Qadir. All chapters included in the book have undergone a review process. The estimated publication date of the volume is December, 2013. The volume will be published by Routledge, London.

All articles re-published as a part of this dissertation are published with the permission of the original publishers.
INTRODUCTION

In the British Guardian.co.uk weblog the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is discussed in the following way:

In 2009 the UK’s education policy directors suffered a significant blow. The PISA tests (OECD Programme for International Student Assessment) results were published, ranking the UK way down the international league table in reading, maths and science.

In total 65 countries were assessed; the UK scored: 25th in reading, 28th in maths and 16th in science. (…)

One western country that has excelled in PISA ratings consistently over the years and is highly regarded across the globe as a leading education nation is Finland. Their sustained success has for many years prompted educationalists to consider how they have achieved this. The reasons behind Finland’s success are complex, not because they have one particularly incomprehensible approach to education, but instead, the evolved working parts within their system, framed within their cultural backdrop complement each other tremendously. (guardian.co.uk 9 April 2012)

This extract from the weblog shows well how in recent years the OECD-led (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) PISA study has aroused people’s popular interest in international and domestic contexts. The text particularly shows how the status of the national education system, in this case of the UK, is compared against the national PISA results. The text also shows how Finland is currently the focus of particular attention when PISA is discussed.

Where does this fascination with PISA and Finland come from? As the text implies, the answer resides in the fact that Finland has repeatedly achieved top scores in PISA. In the assessment launched in co-operation between the OECD and its member countries, the aim of which was to assess how well 15-year-old teenagers in different OECD member and partner countries master some of the knowledge and skills required in future societies¹ Finland has achieved top scores in all rounds so far conducted. PISA first began in 2000 and has since been conducted every three years.

¹ For further information on PISA, see http://www.oecd.org/pisa/.
with the results being published the following year. In 2000, when skills in reading literacy were assessed, Finland came first among all nations assessed. In 2003, when the focus was on mathematics, and in 2006, when the focus was on science, Finland maintained its first place in the focus area while further improving its scores in other areas assessed. In 2009, when the learning outcomes in reading literacy were measured again, Finland came third right after Shanghai-China and South Korea (OECD 2001, 24; 2004a; 2007; 2010).

Finland’s PISA success has piqued other countries since many affluent economies that have invested lavishly in their education systems have scored decidedly lower in the assessment than Finland. In addition to the UK, such countries are Germany, France, Japan and Denmark (e.g. Dobbins & Martens 2012; Ertl 2006; Grek 2009; Gruber 2006; Mons & Pons 2009; OECD 2004b; Takayama 2008; 2010). In these countries, the unexpectedly poor performance has given rise to controversy and demands to domestic decision-makers to introduce reforms that will help countries to improve their standing in future comparisons. In these debates, as shown by the weblog, Finland is often referred to as a country of first class education.

In this dissertation, I study how PISA is debated in the Finnish context. More precisely, I examine how different stakeholders in Finland use and utilise PISA when pondering the status of Finnish education, its strengths and weaknesses, and how they draw on PISA to legitimise decisions already taken or about to be taken in Finnish education. Similarly, I study how the national PISA publicity has affected our understanding of national education and hence the reforms that have been introduced regarding Finnish education.

From the viewpoint of Finland PISA is fascinating. Contrary to many countries that have invested generously in their education systems but that have nevertheless performed poorly in the assessment, Finland has achieved top results. Therefore, one might assume that, contrary to poorly performing countries, in many of which PISA has led to actual political crises, in Finland PISA does not play a role. However, I argue that the role of PISA in a nation-state does not depend on how a country has performed in the comparison but on the expectations of a country with regard to its education system.

If a country performs poorer than expected in the comparison, PISA easily leads to a public outcry, whereas in countries that have met the public expectations of national education, PISA does not necessarily provoke debate (see e.g. Dobbins & Martens 2010; Martens & Niemann 2010). In countries that have performed better than expected, PISA can also trigger heated debates. This seems to be the case in Finland. In these countries PISA is typically deployed by local actors to legitimise decisions already taken concerning national education or to demand reforms to do
even better in future comparisons. I suggest that through these local applications of international comparisons, global ideas about desirable education policies spread and become integrated with national policy discourses. As a result, national policies become synchronised with the trajectories of global social change.

In this dissertation I study the uses made of PISA by the Finnish teaching profession and the officials in the Finnish central government. In addition, I study the national PISA coverage, i.e. the ways in which PISA has been discussed and thus constructed in the Finnish media. I also examine how this publicity about PISA has affected the publicity surrounding one curriculum reform introduced in Finland and, hence, the decisions made concerning that reform.

The work at hand falls specifically into the field of sociology. However, with this dissertation I also wish to contribute to interdisciplinary branches of social sciences such as political science and transnational studies. These disciplines are relevant for the study since scholars active in these fields deal with questions of global governance, global diffusion of policy models and interdependent political decision-making – issues relevant in this study, too.

This introductory article to the dissertation is organised as follows; First, I briefly present how PISA and the OECD have been previously discussed by social scientists. I then move on to discuss how my dissertation is related to these studies. Second, I introduce the main research question posed in this dissertation. Third, I present the individual cases as well as why their selection is justified from the perspective of the research question. Fourth, I present the theoretical and methodological frameworks applied in the study and discuss what this dissertation contributes to these research traditions. After that, I move on to discuss the main results of the study. By way of a conclusion, I discuss the overall role of international governmental organisations (IGOs) in national policies.

Earlier research on PISA

In recent years, PISA has aroused wide public interest. The assessment and Finland’s somewhat unexpected success in it have inspired a wide range of researchers. For instance, researchers have asked what factors account for Finland’s success in PISA. Estimates of the potential success factors have been presented by both Finnish (Antikainen 2006; 2010; Hautamäki et al. 2008; Kupiainen et al. 2009; Laukkanen 2008b; Lavonen 2009; Linnakylä et al. 2004; Niemi 2009; Niemi et al. 2013; Simola 2005; 2008; Välijärvi 2007; Välijärvi et al. 2002) and foreign researchers (Beese 2010;
Kim et al. 2009; Liang 2010; Lie et al. 2003). Similarly, researchers have asked what other countries, particularly those that have scored lower in the comparison could learn from the Finnish system (Andersen 2009; 2010; Dobbins & Martens 2012; Schleicher 2009). At the same time, researchers have asked whether Finland has been so successful after all, i.e. whether PISA is, in the first place, sufficiently methodologically valid to reveal anything about the status of individual countries’ education systems (e.g. Bracey 2004; 2009; Dohn 2007; Prais 2003). There is also a multitude of studies that examine the various national policy debates triggered by PISA (Bieber 2010; Dobbins & Martens 2010; Fredriksson et al. 2009; Grek 2009; Grek et al. 2009; Kiss et al. 2009; Martens & Niemann 2010; Mons & Pons 2009; Pons 2012; Schmidt 2004) and the measures implemented in different nation-states in the hope of improving the respective home countries’ standing in future comparisons (Afonso & Costa 2009; Berényi & Neumann 2009; Bieber & Martens 2011; Ertl 2006; OECD 2004b).

Many of these studies construct pre-eminently the Finnish system as a ‘model system’ from which the country in question could (or should) learn (Mons & Pons 2009; Ringarp & Rothland 2010; Takayama et al. 2013). Likewise, there are studies that deal with the measures taken in different nation-states in order to make one’s own country’s education system resemble that of Finland (Dobbins & Martens 2012; Takayama 2010).

Finally, there are studies that aim to show how the OECD through its research projects influences national education systems and how national education systems are becoming increasingly similar to the education system advocated by the OECD. Risto Rinne, Heinz-Dieter Meyer and Aaron Benavot among others in their studies typify this perspective on the OECD and PISA research.

In their edited book ‘PISA, Power, and Policy’, Meyer and Benavot (2013, 10) claim that through PISA the OECD is advancing ‘a new mode of global educational governance in which state sovereignty over educational matters is replaced by the influence of large-scale international organizations, and in which the very meaning of public education is being recast from a project aimed at forming national citizens and nurturing social solidarity to a project driven by economic demands and labor market orientations’. By this the authors mean that through PISA the decision-making power in education is shifting from the national level to the global context, which is why national education policies are diverging from domestic needs and become isomorphic.

Similar arguments can also be found in the work of Rinne and co-workers. Like Meyer and Benavot, Rinne and co-workers also subscribe to the interpretation according to which the OECD, through its knowledge production, is restricting the nation-states’ decision-making power in education (e.g. Jauhiainen et al. 2001; Kallo 2006; 2009; Niukko 2006a; 2006b; Rinne 2006; 2008; Rinne et al. 2004; Rinne et
al. 2011). Although Rinne and co-workers focused mostly on showing how the OECD through its ‘information management’ steers and regulates the attitudes, values and measures present in Finnish higher education policy (e.g. Kallo 2009; Rinne 2008), the basic argument evinced in these studies is premised on the idea of the OECD as an independent supranational body that influences nation-states’ policies ‘from the outside’ or ‘from top down’ with the effect that nation-states’ authority in national education policymaking is diminishing.\(^2\) This way, the work done by the OECD is not seen as consultative work (Woodward 2009) intended to assist nation-states with their needs but rather as a form of global governance by which the education policy solutions marketed by the OECD pervade national education policymaking processes causing national policies to become distorted and eventually harmonised.

The arguments presented in the last-mentioned studies contribute to our knowledge about the OECD’s possible influence on domestic education. However, by foreclosing how and to what extent the OECD affects national education, I claim, the researchers miss the actual processes and practices through which the global synchronisation of national policies takes place. In other words, the ways in which international comparative data infiltrates national spheres and how the policy ideas mediated through the data are integrated into domestic discourses have gone unexplored.

\textbf{The OECD as a consultative body}

There are a number of studies on the OECD as a consultative body. For instance, Richard Woodward and Leslie Pal argue that the OECD is primarily an organisation created to serve the nation-states and their needs. Woodward (2004; 2009) and Pal (2012) point out that the OECD was created by its member countries and that it is to this day voluntarily consulted when member states seek for advice for problems and challenges existing in national policies.

The OECD grew out of its predecessor, the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC), which was founded in 1947 with the support of the United States and Canada to co-ordinate the Marshall Plan for the reconstruction of Western Europe after World War II. The OEEC served as an international organisation (IO) for co-operation in Europe, its mission being to help the countries damaged by the War to make a new economic start. When by the end of the 1950s the standard of living and the economic activities of Western European countries had achieved or even surpassed the level preceding World War II, the European and the Northern American

\(^2\) For a similar view on the role of the OECD’s knowledge production in narrowing the national decision-making power in education, see e.g. Henry et al. 2001; Klemencic 2010; Ozga and Lingard 2007; Rizvi and Lingard 2006; Taylor et al. 1997.
countries decided to establish a completely new organisation focusing primarily on economic cooperation. On 30 September 1961 the Convention on the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) came into being and so, according to Woodward and Pal, was born a unique forum where the governments of 30 market democracies now work together to address the economic, social and governance challenges of globalisation (Pal 2012; Woodward 2009).

According to Alasuutari (2011a), the OECD can today best be defined as an intergovernmental body that through its statistics and comparisons sets the standards for desirable social development and which thus, increasingly contributes to defining what it means to be a modern and successful society. According to the literature, this does not necessarily mean that the OECD is today somehow disconnected from its members and dictates from above what its member countries should do in order to improve their systems. Rather, as emphasised by Pal (2012, 12), the OECD is still a ‘member-based organisation’ that specialises in the interaction and exploration and mutual sharing of its members and increasingly a wide audience of non-members, too. Its co-operative proceedings are pre-eminently of a consultative and deliberate kind, namely gathering, exchanging and analysing information, painstaking dialogue amongst technical experts from national governments and the OECD secretariat, the evolution of informal best practice guidelines to harmonise or render national policies of states mutually compatible, and surveillance of member countries’ policies. Periodically, according to Woodward (2009, 6), these deliberations pave the way for more profound and overt periods of co-operation where states undertake coordinated action or agree to abide by prescribed rules.

This also seems to be the case regarding education policies. Education experts in individual nation-states are eager to consult the OECD when pondering the status of national education policies and measures that would help to improve national systems. Nation-states are also keen to consult the OECD when they seek for information about ‘best practices’, educational measures that would best work in an international perspective (Mangez & Hilgers 2012; Martens & Niemann 2010). As a result, according to Martens, (2007), a multitude of OECD research projects has arisen intended to show what the most successful and efficient systems are and what accounts for their success.

Actually, according to the OECD (2012), PISA was initiated due to OECD member countries’ governments’ common demand to receive regular and reliable data on the knowledge and skills of their students. The programme was officially launched in 1997, with the first survey taking place in 2000, the second in 2003, the third in 2006 and the fourth in 2009. However, since the OECD is, by definition, an organisation

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3 On the origin of the OECD, see also e.g. Aubrey 1967; Sullivan 1997.
meant to contribute to nation-states’ economic development and to provide support for policymakers, the emphasis in PISA differs from earlier international learning assessments that have been primarily research-oriented.

For instance, before PISA the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) was very active in conducting international learning assessments. However, according to Mangez and Hilgers (2012), the results of the IEA studies remained largely in the hands of the research community. It has been argued that through PISA, the OECD has produced specifically easily comprehensible research data that can be deployed not only by the research community but also by politicians and decision-makers to design domestic policies (Carvalho & Costa 2009; Mangez & Hilgers 2012). Instead of collecting curriculum based data (data that show how well students in individual nation-states master the content of individual school curricula) which has been the case, for instance, with the IEA-led studies, according to Mangez and Hilgers (2012, 197), through PISA, the OECD promotes the evaluation of the skills and competences of students in everyday life situations. Such a change, according to the authors, has increased the relevance of the comparative data in regard the contribution of education to real-life activities and economic performances.

**PISA as a political tool**

In addition to referring to PISA in assessing and developing national education systems, the literature suggests that PISA is widely used as a political tool in promoting policy directions and decisions in domestic contexts. For example, Jenny Ozga (2012) points out that decision-makers in different nation-states use PISA when justifying policy directions they have already sought to implement. Ozga refers particularly to the study conducted in co-operation with six European countries – France, Scotland, Romania, Belgium, Portugal and Hungary – the aim of which was to reveal how PISA is used or ‘fabricated’ across different contexts in individual nation-states. The study suggests that policymakers in the countries analysed used PISA primarily to justify policy directions they had already sought to implement (Ozga 2012, 168; see also Pons 2012). In other words, domestic decision-makers exploited the PISA findings to legitimise policy directions otherwise deemed controversial in the respective domestic contexts.

Gita Steiner-Khamsi (2003) reports a similar finding; in Germany debates about introducing standards, accountability measures, quality monitoring, expanding school choice and school-based management were already in existence before the release of the first PISA findings. For a variety of reasons, however, these reform initiatives were perceived as controversial at the domestic level. Therefore, according to Steiner-Khamsi,
German policymakers favouring these reforms needed an additional source for legitimization or an ‘external authority’ that would provide them with the much-needed justification for introducing the controversial education reforms. Germany’s poor ranking in PISA served ideally as such a legitimization tool. Steiner-Khamsi argues that PISA and Germany’s poor ranking in it constituted an ideal policy strategy to exert ‘external pressure’ for justifying and accelerating domestic education reforms in Germany (Steiner-Khamsi 2003, 4–5). 4

In addition to the use of PISA in legitimising policy directions already decided in domestic contexts, there are also studies that examine the skirmishes PISA has triggered in local contexts, battles in which not only politicians but also other stakeholders argue over how to interpret the national PISA results and what lessons could be drawn from the study. According to the literature, it is typical of such uses that when referring to PISA, each stakeholder picks out elements from the study that best support the objectives of the speaking party. Consequently, PISA is transformed into a limited number of simplified statements (Mangez & Hilgers 2012), arguments intended convince others of the status of national education systems and of desirable policy measures.

Keita Takayama, Sotiria Grek, Michael Dobbins and Kerstin Martens among others have studied PISA from this perspective. Takayama (2008) describes how, when reporting Japan’s PISA results, the Japanese media generated a moral panic over the status of Japanese (basic) education while emphasizing how the allegedly declining national educational outcomes are likely to jeopardise Japan’s future competitiveness. This national PISA panic created by the Japanese media was further capitalised on by the Japanese Ministry of Education, particularly by the Japanese Minister of Education, when he launched two more or less controversial education policy reforms in order to show how the Ministry would take full responsibility for Japanese teenagers’ supposedly declining learning achievements. In point of fact, according to Takayama, the Minister of Education only responded to the Japanese then Prime Minister’s call to rationalise and thus ‘neoliberalize’ Japanese education but, more importantly, to re-establish the Ministry of Education’s political legitimacy at a time of increasing neoliberal state restructuring.

In his other article, Takayama (2010) describes how Japanese progressives and also the neoliberal observers have used the PISA findings, and particularly the success of Finland, as a political tool when calling for changes to the national education system. The progressives have maintained that Japan has much to learn from the Finnish education system, which, in their interpretations is based on values such as equality and high quality. Neoliberals for their part picked out other characteristics from the

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4 For a related discussion, see also Steiner-Khamsi 2004.
Finnish system that best served their political ends. This way, according to Takayama, both parties constructed the Finnish education system as an ideal that served their political ends while at the same time intended to cast the interests of the competing party in an unfavourable light.

In a similar vein, Grek (2009) studied different countries’ key education policy actors’ responses to PISA and the ways in which PISA thereby enters national education policy spaces. By analysing reports from Finland, Germany and UK and other relevant policy documents including domestic PISA discussions, Grek concludes that the responses of Finland, Germany and UK to PISA differ significantly from each other, although they all have in common that PISA – and the parameters and policy direction it lays down – are without question accepted. Grek argues that depending on the nation-state, local policy actors ‘are using PISA as a form of domestic policy legitimation, or as a means of defusing discussion by presenting policy as based on robust evidence’ (2009, 35). Through the unquestioning acceptance of PISA and through its uses in domestic education policy debates, PISA, according to the author, enters national education policy spaces with the result that national education policies and practices become ever uniform.

The study conducted by Dobbins and Martens (2012) reveals that also in France, in spite of French education authorities’ strong initial resistance to PISA, the assessment has gained the sympathy of the French public. According to the authors, in France the Finnish education system in particular was frequently referred to when the status of the French system and the reforms allegedly required were debated. According to the authors this is no wonder, since from a French perspective, the Finnish model could be characterised by its emphasis on social integration, adaptability and flexibility, matters on which France particularly came in for criticism in PISA, and which in turn provided sound arguments for both the French main political parties to defend their interests. Consequently, in 2006 the French government introduced a wide range of secondary school reforms intended to improve France’s future learning performances. However, the authors emphasise, many of these national reform initiatives later foundered due to public opposition.

The aim of this study

The empirical approach applied in this dissertation is closely related to the studies discussed above, i.e. to the studies that examine how PISA is actually used and referred to when domestic actors seek to justify decisions already made or about to be made
in national politics. Primarily, I examine how the teaching profession in Finland and officials in the Finnish central government have used PISA and Finland’s ranking in it when discussing the present and future status of Finnish basic education. Furthermore, I analyse how the Finnish media have covered PISA. I also study how the national PISA publicity has affected the publicity surrounding other (related) issues in the domestic sphere and thereby the decisions relating to Finnish education policy. Yet my approach differs from the existing studies in three distinct ways.

First, unlike scholars, whose starting point is to argue that the OECD dictates the direction of national policies, for this study the role of the OECD in national policies is an open question that needs to be tackled by an empirical analysis of the processes through which it may exert influence. I argue that it is difficult, if not impossible, to show how the OECD through its research projects steers national policies. This is because national policies may be due to other actors pursuing similar ideas. The study conducted by Klaus Armingeon and Michelle Beyeler (2004) is a good example of the problems social scientists face in their efforts to show the OECD’s impact on national policies. The aim of that study was to examine the possible impact of the OECD on national social policies regarding national welfare reforms. Although the contributors to the study identified a remarkable concordance between OECD recommendations and national policies, they rejected the hypothesis of a strong and direct impact. This is because the concordance between policies may be due to the influence of other IOs. The national reforms maybe caused by domestic challenges, the policy changes may result from new constellations of domestic political power, and, finally, there may have been changes in economic paradigms, not only at the level of the OECD but also at the national level (see Armingeon 2004, 230–31).

As the existing research methods do not appear to be capable of demonstrating conclusively what in national politics is attributable to the influence of the OECD, I suggest, it is more useful to examine how PISA is actually used and referred to by different stakeholders in the nation-state contexts. If PISA is invoked when actors justify decisions already made or in the making in national policies, the OECD does indeed play a role in domestic policymaking. In other words, if PISA is perceived as something that is worth bringing into the political argumentation, it plays a role.

How in the work at hand the role of the various actors in national political decision-making is understood is thus linked essentially to the actors’ role as parties to the decision-making process. National interest groups are parties to these processes when they take their stance on what is to be pursued in the national education policy context. On the other hand the OECD is also a party to these processes. By providing information on what are desirable or efficient national systems, the organisation furthers our understanding of what might be desirable policy in the context of our
own country. Yet the OECD is not an actor in these processes unless reference is made to it in national discussions. I contend that the role of the OECD comes into being when it is taken as a part of the national political argumentation. If it is considered that the OECD research contributes something new to the discussion or something which enhances the credibility of the argumentation and so its ability to convince, then reference is made to it. In this way the OECD, like the national actors, becomes a party to those processes in which national policies come into existence, albeit in such a way that the OECD would appear to exert influence over national policies mainly through national discussions.

In that sense, the way in which societal actor status or role is understood in the work at hand differs radically from the dramaturgic-sociological way of comprehending role. In these theories the role of actor is approached in the drama frame of reference (e.g. Brown 1989; Goffman 1969). It is argued that actors may have varying roles which they ‘perform’ and which are thus something other than the reality underlying the role.

I do not believe that such an understanding of the actor’s role can be applied to the work at hand. In other words, the status of political or societal actor enjoyed by local actors or the OECD embodies nothing that could be presented or maintained in order to convey an advance ‘written’ image. Nor is it something which can be relegated at will to the background, for example, to some other role or even right off the stage. If anything, I argue, actors have a role in the national policy processes when they operate as parties to these processes. This may take place directly, which is often the case with national interest groups, or then indirectly, for example, when the OECD exerts influence over national policies by way of the images is constructs as to what is a policy to be pursued in the respective national context.

This dissertation also differs from studies examining the actual uses of PISA in the nation-state contexts. Many of these studies, too, assume that PISA, after being accepted locally, harmonises national education policies. Grek among others states that the unconditional acceptance of PISA – and the parameters and direction it establishes – has powerful effects on curricula and pedagogy in the participating nations (Grek 2009, 34–35). This idea of PISA determining national policies is based on the notion that the OECD is a very (or even the most) influential actor in shaping national policies. In this dissertation however, my aim is to examine more widely the process in which the IGOs such as the OECD play a role in national policies.

My aim is therefore not to deny the potential steering effect of the OECD but to increase the understanding of the actual mechanisms through which IGOs may exert influence. As noted before, this dissertation focuses on the role of the local actors in introducing PISA and the ideas it conveys into national contexts. I suggest that it is particularly due to local actors and their creative uses of international comparisons that
IGOs gain their agentive capacity and through which global ideas pervade national spheres (Rautalin & Alasuutari 2009). In these processes, where global policy ideas are brought into local contexts, local actors’ own motives and interests mesh with the global ideas. Actors do not use comparisons only in order to improve national systems. They also capitalise on PISA to further their own political objectives. By applying this kind of ‘bottom up’ perspective to the globalisation research this dissertation also sheds more light on the alleged role of the OECD in global governance.

The media analysis conducted in this dissertation has a particular novelty. Unlike the existing studies, it focuses on how the public national PISA discussion also affects the publicity of other (related) issues in the same country and, hence, the decisions concerning national education. There are studies that have examined the national PISA coverage and its possible effects on national opinion formation regarding education (e.g. Fladmoe 2011; Takayama et al. 2013). Additionally, there are studies that examine the factors explaining national public reactions to PISA, and the potential effects of these reactions on national education policies (e.g. Dobbins & Martens 2010; Martens & Niemann 2010; Pons 2012; Schmidt 2004; Takayama 2008).

However, these studies do not consider how the points made in the national media regarding PISA affect and determine the ways in which other issues concerning national education can be discussed in the national public. In this dissertation, in addition to examining how the Finnish teaching profession and the officials in the Finnish central government exploit PISA when advocating their standpoints, I also examine the role of the national media in introducing PISA to Finnish audiences. I argue that in reporting PISA the media construct facts of the assessment that then have a bearing on how education can be discussed in the domestic context and, consequently, on the evolving policies and practices.5

In the following, I present the main research question posed in this thesis. I also introduce the individual case studies forming part of the dissertation and deliberate why their selection is justified from the perspective of the research question.

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5 This kind of understanding of the media as an actor affecting domestic policies is closely related to Ari Adut’s (2012, 254–55) theory of the public sphere. Unlike other theories, Adut’s theory of publicity emphasises the complex, contradictory, and nonlinear effects of general visibility and publicity on political actors, social groups, and institutions. Instead of conceiving of the public as a sphere or as an arena that is open in principle to all citizens, an abstract space in which citizens can discuss and debate public issues without being subject to coercion, the theory explores on what conditions something we call publicity emerges, what the collective and status effects of publicity are, and how the publicity can be a resource or a constraint for societal actors and institutions. As in Adut’s thinking, in this dissertation, too, the national media are seen as a part of the public sphere, the contents of which develop on certain conditions that invariably also influence the publicity of other related issues and, hence the related policy decisions.
Research questions and descriptions of the case studies

As I have highlighted earlier, from the viewpoint of Finland, PISA is especially intriguing. In contrast to many strong economies in the world that have invested heavily in their education systems but that have still performed poorly in the assessment, Finland has achieved top results. Thus, one might suppose that, contrary to poorly performing countries, in many of which PISA has caused a public outcry, in Finland PISA does not play a role. Nevertheless, as noted earlier, I assume that the role of PISA in a nation-state does not depend on how a country has performed in the comparison but on the country’s expectations of its education system. If the national PISA results do not meet the public’s expectations of the national education system, it can be argued, PISA easily leads to debates. In these situations, domestic actors invoke PISA to bring about changes in current systems.

If and when the results meet or even exceed public expectations, PISA can also lead to debate. In such cases PISA is invoked by domestic stakeholders to defend the decisions already taken in national education. Good results can even be utilised by local actors to do even better in future comparisons. That is, results are used to substantiate the need for changes to the existing systems in order to do even better in the future.

I argue that in all these processes PISA is used because local players see it and the ideas it promotes as potentially advantageous to their own national policy objectives but, more importantly, to their own political interests and positions. If the points highlighted by PISA are favourable for domestic actors and their interests, these are easily taken up.

Finland’s top scores in PISA have certainly been a blessing for those actors who believe they have made the right decisions concerning Finnish education. That is to say, Finland’s top ranking certainly serves as an excellent tool for those parties wishing to justify the validity of the decisions they have already taken regarding Finnish education policy. However, the success of Finland in PISA does not necessarily appear as a universal blessing in Finland. For those actors totally dissatisfied with Finnish basic education, PISA undoubtedly appears as a curse. For these parties it is especially difficult to convince others of the need for change since at least from an international perspective things in Finnish basic education seem to be better than good. These parties need to develop ingenious rhetoric to convince others that the opposite is true, i.e. of the urgent need for changes in Finnish basic education.

Against this background, I argue it is reasonable to study how different stakeholders in Finland aim to turn Finland’s success in PISA to their own advantage, i.e. how they capitalise on PISA when justifying policy decisions already made or need to be made in Finnish education. I argue that all these local accounts of PISA are interlinked
so that when referring to PISA each actor aims to adjust his or her argument to the interpretations made of PISA already familiar to the Finnish public. In referring to PISA local actors introduce new viewpoints into the existing PISA discussion in order to promote the interests of the speaking party. In that way, domestic actors change the circumstances and influence the prevailing conceptions of reality as well as views of what are desirable or appropriate rationales (Alasuutari et al. 2013a).

By using PISA domestic actors domesticate the comparison into local contexts so that the exogenous origin of the ideas put forward in it disappears and they come to be seen as ‘domestic’. The same policy idea or principle as introduced in the comparison subsequently has different outcomes in different nation-states. The final policy outcome depends on these local developments, in which all kinds of counter-discourses are mobilised to negotiate the shape of policy reforms. Consequently, as emphasised by Alasuutari (2011b), the end result may be a far cry from the original ideals (as promoted by the OECD) and there may be considerable differences between countries in which the same policy idea or model has been introduced.

Drawing on the discussion above I formulate the research question for my dissertation as follows: What role does PISA play in Finnish education policy? As noted before, I approach the question bottom-up by examining how different interest groups or stakeholders in Finland make use of PISA. I focus on three actor or stakeholder groups that are pivotal in Finnish education policy. These are the teaching profession in Finland, the officials working in Finnish central government and the national media.

It can be argued that both Finnish teachers and government officials have a vested interest in national education policy although from time to time their views of what would be a desirable national education policy differ essentially from each other. For instance, teachers have traditionally advocated policies that would improve the quality of comprehensive schooling but also the profession’s salary and working conditions nationally. Officials, for their part, typically discuss education from the perspective of the central government, the aim of which is the overall development of national education.

The media differ from other actors studied since the national media do not constitute any uniform actor with particular policy objectives. If anything, I suggest, the media is a forum or arena in which different important issues are raised and actively discussed. In reporting events, the national media evince interpretations of these events, thereby making them into a meaningful and comprehensible public story. Some of these stories or discourses may achieve prominence that determines how other (related) issues can be discussed in the national public. In this dissertation, I examine how in reporting PISA the Finnish media have rendered the study comprehensible to national audiences. I also examine how these understandings served by the media have affected the ways in
which we can talk about education and, consequently, the evolving policy solutions in Finland.

It can be argued that by examining the uses made of PISA by these three actors or stakeholder groups I can present a comprehensive picture of how PISA is debated in the Finnish nation-state context and how PISA thereby becomes integrated with the Finnish education policy discourse.

**Role of PISA in Finnish education policy as used by teachers**

To study how the Finnish teaching profession uses PISA in the promotion of its own interests and what role these uses play in Finnish education policy is a fascinating research object, since before the publication of the first PISA results there was a lot of public discussion about Finnish teachers being very dissatisfied with the general appreciation of their profession and with their working conditions. A wide range of studies conducted in the 1990s and at the turn of the millennium reported, for instance, teachers’ complaints about their growing workloads, ever more difficult and demanding pupils, low salaries and low overall respect for the teaching profession in Finland (e.g. Salo & Kinnunen 1993; Simola & Hakala 2001; Syrjäläinen 2002; Webb et al. 2004a; 2004b; Viinamäki 1997; Virta & Kurikka 2001). Against this background, it was justified to study how Finnish teachers as a profession view the PISA results for Finland, i.e. how they interpret the results so as not to be detrimental to the interests of harm the profession in Finland’s future education.

To analyse the accounts of PISA evinced by the teaching profession, in the first article forming part of this thesis entitled ‘The Curse of Success: the impact of the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment on the discourses of the teaching profession in Finland’ we used as our empirical data the publication Opettajalehti, the official organ of the Finnish teachers’ trade union.6 We focused primarily on the editorials. The data used in the empirical analysis was collected from the time period January 2001–October 2005.7

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6 The article was published in the European Educational Research Journal, Volume 6, Number 4 2007. The data used in the article was collected and pre-analysed by Rautalin. Based on this preliminary analysis, the text was brought into its current written form in co-operation with Pertti Alasuutari.

7 The reasons for collecting data also prior to the time in which the PISA results were published was to find out whether the discourses within which teachers in Finland discuss their professional standing changed as a consequence of Finland’s PISA success. Our analysis revealed that PISA did indeed affect the discourses within which teachers discussed their professional interests. For instance, before PISA, issues such as teachers’ university training and the professional expertise allegedly resulting from it were not so much used as justifications when teachers defended their professional interests. They actually became issues only after the release after the first PISA results. In addition, prior to the publication of

Marjaana Rautalin
The data selected for empirical analysis is justified for many reasons. First, *Opettaja-lehti* itself is an interesting research object since it represents the views of the trade union of Finnish teachers, the OAJ (Trade Union of Education in Finland). Both the trade union and *Opettaja-lehti* have been particularly active in defending Finnish teachers' interests amidst past societal changes in Finland. For instance, they played major roles in negotiations concerning the introduction of the national comprehensive school system and the national teacher education reform back in the 1970s. In addition, the editors-in-chief of *Opettaja-lehti* played a significant role along with representatives of the trade union in a number of salary agreements concerning Finnish teachers. Second, *Opettaja-lehti* is the oldest weekly periodical in Finland. It is the only official publication of the OAJ, too, and thus widely read by various institutional actors in the Finnish education sector. Finally, the editorials of *Opettaja-lehti* are significant sites for political advocacy. The editorials present the profession’s official opinions on political issues and these are read by various political actors and decision-makers in Finland.

For all these reasons, it was justified to study *Opettaja-lehti*, and particularly its editorials, to find out how the Finnish teaching profession participates in the Finnish PISA debate and how the arguments put forward by the profession may affect the processes in which decisions concerning national education are taken. As noted many times before according to PISA Finnish basic education is both of high quality and efficient from an international perspective. If this interpretation of the status of Finnish basic education gains wide public acceptance in Finland it could mean that nothing in Finnish education system will be altered. That is, if Finnish basic education with all its features is deemed successful and efficient by the national public, Finnish teachers’ complaints about huge workloads, bad working conditions and the overall low respect for Finnish basic education will appear somewhat unconvincing and difficult to promote in the national context. For this reason, it was reasonable to examine whether Finnish teachers use PISA in ways that do not endanger teachers’ interests in the future but on the contrary, that they would improve the future position of the profession in Finnish education. To convince the public, and particularly the Finnish decision-makers, of the need for reforms the Finnish teaching profession needs convincing arguments, i.e. ingenious rhetoric and the ability to convince the public of the argument that despite the success in PISA there remain numerous areas in Finnish education that need to

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8 On the position of *Opettaja-lehti*’s and its status in Finnish societal discussions, see e.g. the website published by the organ at http://www.opettaja.fi/portal/page?_pageid=95,82039&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL.
be improved. The editorials of *Opettaja-lehti* form one of the central forums for such rhetoric.

**Role of PISA in Finnish education policy as used by government officials**

In the second article forming part of this dissertation and entitled ‘The uses of the national PISA results by Finnish officials in central government’, together with Pertti Alasuutari I examined how officials in Finnish central government participated in the national PISA debate. We studied in particular the ways in which government officials working in the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Finnish National Board of Education (FNBE) interpreted PISA and Finland’s results in it. In addition, we studied public documents, such as the official national PISA reports and bulletins published by the Ministry and the FNBE. The accounts of PISA in these two data sets were chosen as the object of research since they reveal whether and in what ways the interpretations of PISA made in these data are biased by the standpoint of Finnish central government. That is to say, whether the informants work in the Ministry or in the FNBE, since the government officials necessarily see national education policy from the standpoint of the national administration, it was interesting to see what use they made of Finland’s PISA results when justifying their standpoints.

The uses made of PISA by government officials is a justified research object for many reasons. First, the views of government officials carry considerable weight in the processes in which Finnish education policy takes shape. Government officials are responsible for the preparation and implementation of the main political decisions in Finland. They also have a crucial role in producing and disseminating new political thoughts and ideas. Officials are typically also consulted in the preparation of legislative proposals in Finland (e.g. Lampinen 1998). Hence, it can be argued that Finnish central government officials play a significant role in the process in which Finnish education policy is formed.

Second, Finnish government officials’ views on PISA are significant inasmuch as at least in light of Finland’s PISA rankings the interpretation could easily be made that all is well in Finnish education and that in Finnish basic education there is hardly anything to improve. Therefore we asked whether Finnish central government officials interpret PISA so as to defend the decisions already taken in Finnish education policy or to point to new areas of development concerning Finnish basic education. To access

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9 Like the previous study, this study is also based on a preliminary analysis and interpretation of the empirical data made by Rautalin. Based on this preliminary analysis, the text was brought to its current written form in co-operation with Pertti Alasuutari. The research article was published in the Journal of Education Policy, Volume 24, Number 5, 2009.
the views of the Finnish state administration, we used as our empirical data interviews conducted with officials working in the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture and the FNBE, bulletins published by these institutions, and the official national PISA reports.

**Role of PISA in Finnish education policy as used by the national media**

In the third and last case study forming part of this dissertation I examined how the Finnish media discussed Finland’s PISA results. I also examined how this publicity about PISA potentially affected the publicity surrounding one curriculum reform implemented in Finland and thereby the decisions taken concerning that reform. As I have noted before, from the viewpoint of the dissemination of global policy ideas, the national media is an interesting research object. Unlike other domestic actors or stakeholders, who knowingly or unknowingly refer to international comparisons to promote their own policy objectives, in this dissertation the national media is not seen as a monolithic actor with specific policy interests. If anything, the media is seen as forum or space in which foreign or novel news are rendered comprehensible for national audiences (Clausen 2004; Gans 1979; Liebes 1992; Nossek 2004).

For many ordinary citizens phenomena such as PISA exist practically only through the media, via the discourses and frames by which they are made sense of and deemed to be worth learning about. That is, the media are the main forum through which we have access to many topical issues, such as national education, and how this appears in the international perspective. The interpretations proposed by the media serve to enable us to form our views on these issues. Yet this does not mean that the media as a group of journalists and media companies have the power to frame issues any way they like or to determine what is news or worth reading about (c.f. Lazarsfeld & Merton 1948; Lippmann 1922; Perse 2001). Rather, as emphasised by Alasuutari (2013, 105); ‘the media both circulate and reflect the notions that are prevalent among the population. In that sense journalists are experts in sensing what is of interest to their audiences and from which perspective’. Through these framing practices the media organise the world both for news workers who report on the events (Scheufele 2006) and also for us readers who aim to make sense of the events reported (Entman 1989; Gamson et al. 1992; Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Iyengar 1991; Tuchman 1978). When assumed

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10 The results of this case study will be published in a book chapter to be included in an international edited volume ‘National Policy-making: Domestication of Global Trends’. The volume is edited by Pertti Alasuutari and Ali Qadir. All chapters included in the book have gone through a review process. The estimated publication date of the entire volume is December, 2013. The volume will be published by Routledge, London.
and accepted locally, these constructs proffered by the media also have a bearing on domestic policy decisions (e.g. Adoni and Mane 1984; Altheide and Snow 1979; Gunther and Mughan 2000).

By this I mean that political decision-makers in their work need to take account of the public understanding of national education, i.e. its alleged strengths and weaknesses, and make decisions that are, at least to some extent, in line with how the great majority perceive national education. This has been the case especially in Germany and Japan, where, ever since the release of the first PISA results, there has been intense public discussion about what caused the poor performance and who is to blame for it. In these countries, public pressure has also forced the political elite to re-examine the existing policy. As a consequence, numerous reforms have been introduced in the hope of improving the national education system, and thus its future standing in international comparisons (e.g. Ertl 2006; Gruber 2006; Niemann 2010; Takayama 2008).

Yet the positive publicity of national policymaking can also ensure that domestic decision-makers can continue with their work as before. If PISA does not occasion any worthy cause for criticism, it can be assumed that the general public will not seek to intervene in the work of the national decision-makers, who can then continue uninterrupted with their reform work.\footnote{For the effects of positive publicity of national policymaking, see e.g. Adut 2012.}

The starting point for the study was the fact that soon after the release of the first PISA results, i.e. at the beginning of the 2000s, a curriculum reform was introduced in Finland by the central government the content and aims of which essentially ran contrary to how politicians and educational experts in Finland had celebrated the factors explaining Finland’s success in PISA. In the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, Finland’s success in PISA has been explained mainly by the successful national education policy, for instance the autonomy given to the local level. Yet, soon after the release of the first PISA results, a curriculum reform was introduced by the central administration that drastically curtailed the autonomy of Finnish schools and teachers.

Where the earlier national framework curriculum of 1994 (NBE 1994) was perhaps the least restrictive in the world, enabling the Finnish municipalities and, ultimately, individual schools to set their own curricula on the basis of the national core curriculum, the framework curriculum introduced in 2004 (NBE 2004) was much more specific and binding.

In the Finnish central administration, the introduction of the new framework curriculum was justified particularly by the fact-finding work conducted by the FNBE in the late 1990s and the results of which had indicated that the previous reform, i.e. the curriculum of 1994, was moving in the right direction but did not meet the
requirements of the new millennium. In other words, in the FNBE it was believed that although Finland had achieved good results in PISA just at the time when basic education was nationally governed by very liberal curricular guidelines (Laukkanen 2008a), the new detailed framework curriculum would meet the challenges emerging in Finnish future education even better (Lindström 2005).

Although the curriculum reform appeared to rest on sound national principles and its preparation was also started long before the first PISA results came out, it is nevertheless paradoxical that this reform, despite its seemingly inconsistent nature, was never publicly contested in Finland in the context of discussing PISA. That is, it is interesting that the reform that apparently ran contrary to the explanations evinced by Finnish government officials and researchers for the factors behind Finland’s success in PISA was not critically debated by the national press when PISA was discussed.

In the study, to account for the paradox of why it was possible in Finland to carry through an educational reform that conflicted fundamentally with how Finland’s success in PISA had been explained in the Finnish public, I analysed the national PISA publicity, particularly the ways in which PISA had been discussed and thus constructed in the national media. I also examined how this publicity about PISA affected the publicity surrounding the national curriculum reform and, hence, the decisions taken concerning that reform.

As empirical data I used stories referring to PISA and stories making reference to the curriculum for Finnish basic education appearing in the Finnish quality (print) media: *Helsingin Sanomat, Suomen Tietotoimisto* and *Suomen Kuvalehti*. Both news stories and letters to the editor published by the media selected were included in the empirical data. The media texts were collected from the period January 2001–April 2009.

**Theoretical and methodological framework**

*Methods applied*

The theoretical and methodological starting point of this dissertation is to scrutinise how reality is constructed in discursive practices, i.e. how various actors through their accounts and interpretations of the environment influence the ways in which we conceive of reality (Berger & Luckmann 1967). To study these processes, in individual cases studies I have applied theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches influenced by Michel Foucault’s notion of discourse as well as Chaïm Perelman’s theory of rhetoric.
The discourse-analytical approach has been useful for analysing the empirical data since it provides tools with which to analyse how different actors in their language use give meanings to different states of affairs, how they categorise the world and produce self-evident truths and how the discursive formations eventually, when accepted and turned into organisational forms, assume material forms as external conditions for people’s action (Foucault 1972; Potter 1996; Potter & Wetherell 1987; Wood & Kroger 2000). In other words, the approach applied here looks at language use not only from the viewpoint of meaning - i.e. how signs designate things– but also from the viewpoint of action – i.e. how signs also form and affect the reality in which they are used. In the case of PISA, this means that actors discussing the assessment produce meanings of the assessment, of the results it has produced, of the educational systems assessed within the comparisons as well as of the status of their own educational system. When accepted and assumed locally, these interpretations also affect the decisions concerning national education and hence the form of evolving practices.

The theory of rhetoric, for its part, was useful for analysing the empirical data since it helped to reveal how the same actors in their language use also actively aim at creating credibility, statements that convince others of the necessity of various goals, thus eliciting the desired actions (Perelman 1982; Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969). As noted before, when local actors refer to PISA they do not aim solely at improving Finnish basic education. They also use PISA in order to further their own political objectives. To smooth personal or professional interests away from the arguments and in this way to pursue their goals successfully, actors need to develop rhetoric that appeals to principles and values commonly shared among the public. In their reporting of the events the media likewise pick out interpretations from the public the premises of which are commonly shared among them. In these processes, where different actors or stakeholders endeavour to convince others of the conclusions that can be drawn from PISA and how Finnish education should be developed, rhetorical choices play a significant role. The outcome depends on how plausibly actors can construct their arguments. Arguments that appear widely convincing are often converted into corresponding policy decisions and practices.

In the case study examining the uses made of the PISA results by the teaching profession the main method applied was Foucault’s notion of discourse. We asked what discourses were used in the editorials of Opettaja-lehti when the national PISA results are discussed. Additionally, we asked how the interpretations of the PISA results and their implications were used to justify the policy measures proposed. Finally, in line with Foucault’s thinking, we asked what identities and subject positions were produced when the national PISA results and the potential reasons for them are discussed in Opettaja-lehti. By posing these questions, I do not, of course, mean that we did not use
any rhetorical approach when analysing our data. If anything, being aware that talk of safeguarding interests invariably also seeks to exert influence, we examined how the teaching profession aimed to turn PISA to its own advantage, i.e. how the profession aimed to interpret PISA so that it would not weaken but strengthen teachers’ policy objectives in the Finnish future education. In these processes, as noted before, rhetoric plays a significant role.

In the article examining the uses made of PISA by the Finnish government officials both Perelman’s theory of rhetoric and Foucault’s notion of discourse were applied. We were particularly interested in finding out how the government officials, when discussing the status of Finnish education, appealed to PISA when defending their positions and political agenda. In addition, we examined the premises their arguments were built on. As noted in the case study, by revealing the underlying premises of the argumentation, one is able to reveal the prevalent values of the speakers but also of the nation. That is, speakers routinely appeal to premises or values that they assume to be shared by the audience. Thus it was expedient to ask how the government officials interpreted PISA so that the officials appeared generally credible and that they would support the interests of the national central administration. By thus foreclosing the tacit premises of the rhetoric, in line with Foucault’s thinking, we also aimed to shed light on how and why PISA served as a tool in the national discourse on education policy.

In the case study examining the Finnish media debate on PISA and its effects on national policy decisions, both methods were applied in the empirical analysis. As in the preceding study, in this study I was also interested in the different types of justifications or premises used in various arguments put forward in the media. I asked what justifications were used by various members of the audience that were perceived to be so convincing that they were taken up and reported by the media. This was important as I wanted to learn how the dominant interpretations made of PISA and the national curriculum reform as evinced by the media assumed organisational forms, thus shaping Finnish education policy.

Theoretical approaches

Besides discussing how the various national PISA interpretations affect the national education policies and practices and how these accounts are, in essence, of a rhetorical nature, in this dissertation, I also wish to make a contribution to theoretical approaches accounting for the various mechanisms through which the global diffusion of policies takes place, i.e. to the frameworks that explain how global policy models and ideas
spread and become adopted in various local contexts and how national policies thus seem to look alike. Scholars often refer to these by the term of **diffusion theories**.

Diffusion theories have been discussed and reviewed by many scholars (e.g. Dobbin et al. 2007; Guzman 2006; Marsh & Sharman 2009; Simmons & Elkins 2004; True & Mintrom 2001). One of the most comprehensive reviews so far has been provided by Beth A. Simmons, Frank Dobbin and Geoffrey Garret. In their edited book ‘The Global Diffusion of Markets and Democracy’ (2008a), the authors build a model that aims to reveal the causal mechanisms behind the spread of political and economic liberalisation. The key finding is that national policy choices are at least to some extent **interdependent**, i.e. governments in individual nation-states adopt new policies not in isolation but in response to what their counterparts in other countries are doing. In reviewing the literature dealing with these aspects, in the introductory article to their book, the authors suggest that there are at least four distinct mechanisms through which the interdependent decision-making takes place. According to the authors, these can be called coercion, competition, learning and emulation (Simmons et al. 2008b, 2).

Although the authors mainly concentrate on explaining why much of the world has come to accept markets and democracy, I believe that the global synchronisation of basic education policies can also be studied from these perspectives. That is to say, in the processes where PISA, and in this context often also the policies adopted by other countries, are used as a justification when defending policies made or in the making in national basic education, it can be argued that at least part of the aforementioned mechanisms are concerned. In the following, I discuss the main points made in these traditions. After that I delineate what the limitations of these theories are from the standpoint of this dissertation.

**Coercion**

According to Simmons and colleagues (2008b, 10), coercion takes place in situations in which strong actors impose their preferences for policy change on the weak. According to the coercion theorists, coercion can be exercised by various actors, mostly, however, by powerful governments or the IOs they dominate. It is argued that coercion is applied in various ways, too. It can be applied through the threat or use of physical force, the manipulation of economic costs and benefits, and even through the monopolisation of information or expertise. The coercion theories suggest that policies diffuse typically from the ‘centre’ both actively through conditionality and passively through unilateralism by more powerful actors (Simmons et al. 2008b, 10).

In Simmons’s and colleagues’ text in this context especially IOs are taken as an example. It is argued that using a strategy of conditionality, IOs link policy reform to
political membership or to economic resources in a demonstrable quid pro quo fashion. According to the authors, this is the case, for instance, with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Developing countries need financial assistance from the international financial institutions (IFIs) either to ward off crises or to make infrastructural investments that are hard to fund through private markets. Lenders, in this case the IMF, then condition their financial support on domestic economic reform it deems desirable (Simmons et al. 2008b, 11).

Simmons and colleagues (2008b, 12) stress that the debate about formal conditionality applies but only to developing countries that receive support from IFIs. They argue that there is also a less formal face to conditionality that may be associated with the influence of powerful actors through bilateral aid and treaties or through organisations such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), the European Union (EU), and the North American Free Trade Alliance (NAFTA) – and with the demands that participation imposes on weaker members. In these cases, according to the authors, there is no explicit give-and-take. Rather, weaker parties simply expect that they will receive some benefits by making the policy change favoured by more powerful actors. According to Simmons and colleagues, this is especially the case with EU and NAFTA memberships. Membership of these organisations has its privileges, but it also costs in terms of policy latitude (Simmons et al. 2008b, 12).

Coercion approach emphasises that imposing conditions is of itself not the only means by which the compelling state wields power. Simmons and colleagues refer to Lloyd Gruber’s definition of ‘go-it-alone power’ and argue that the powerful may also influence the weak even if the former do not tie benefits to the behaviour of the latter. According to the authors, the United States’ decision to liberalise trade with Canada is a good example of this. The authors argue that the US-Canadian agreement had a profound influence on Mexico’s economic liberalisation programme. Mexican leaders would have preferred to liberalise at a more unhurried pace, but the US-Canadian agreement created conditions that could have diverted trade and investments to the north – leaving Mexico worse off than the pre-agreement status quo (Simmons et al. 2008b, 14).

The coercion approach emphasises that coercion of a sort may also be exercised by a country that seizes the policy initiative. In this context Simmons and colleagues refer to situations in which a monopolist decision about how much to produce affect whether other potential producers will enter the market, and if so, how much they will produce (Simmons et al. 2008b, 14). In a similar vein, the authors stress that where nation-states need to coordinate their policies, participants may follow the behaviour of a powerful nation simply by virtue of its salience. For instance, it is argued that the salience of German institutions as a model for Europe has certainly played a crucial role in the
development of supranational innovations, even though few would argue that Germany has overtly sought to ‘coerce’ Europe to follow its lead (Simmons et al. 2008b, 15).

**Competition**

Another mechanism by which the authors aim to explain policy diffusion between nation-states is competition. According to Simmons et al., this mechanism offers a far more decentralised explanation for policy diffusion than power, hierarchy and coercion (Simmons et al. 2008b, 17). It is argued that governments have strong incentives to choose ‘market friendly’ policies that make their jurisdiction an attractive place for global investment, and to remain competitive in product markets by minimising costs.

According to the authors, competition arguments are typically applied to economic policies, although there is some evidence that investors and even buyers in the global marketplace have preferences for certain political systems. According to Simmons et al. (2008b, 18), this dynamic has been widely documented, particularly at the subnational level. In the United States, for example, states engage in fierce competition to attract investment through the use of specific economic incentives.

According to Simmons et al.’s theorizing (2008b, 20), competition can be linked to a number of institutional changes, too. The authors argue that scholars of competition law have discovered the effects competitive pressures may have on legal models, institutions and practices. The authors argue among other things that governments are thought to compete in the global economy by moving their legal systems toward the American model. It is argued that the pressure for openness and transparency, which American legal norms are thought to exemplify, underlie this analysis.

Although Simmons et al. are convinced that the dissemination of policies is in many ways attributable to competition they also find shortcomings in the existing literature and theorising. For instance, the authors argue that models of diffusion that rely on economic competition may be useful in exposing the explanation for policy liberalisation. Yet, they are typically silent about the deeper structure of ideas that probably gives rise to the belief that the best way to respond to liberalisation elsewhere is roughly in kind (Simmons et al. 2008b, 23).

The authors also criticise the existing theories for not addressing more profound constitutive questions such as how governments come to believe in the first place that liberalisation will contribute to economic growth and development (Simmons et al. 2008b, 23). For competition to be supported as a diffusion mechanism, the authors suggest that policy innovation would have to be shown to be conditioned by the policies of competitors for the resources they play (Simmons et al. 2008b, 24).
Learning

According to Simmons’s and colleagues’ review (2008b, 25), learning as a mechanism ‘refers to a change in beliefs, or to a change in the strength of one’s confidence in existing beliefs, resulting either from observation and interpretation or from acquisition of new theories or behavioral repertoires’. What according to the authors is essential in this process is that actors learn not only directly from their own experiences, but also vicariously from the policy experiments of others, and apply the lessons drawn in designing their own policies (Simmons et al. 2008b, 25).

Policy learning seems to be especially prominent in situations where governments draw conclusions based on the data generated by policy experiments elsewhere, thus narrowing the range of interpretations regarding the causal relationships between the policy and its hypothesised outcome (Simmons et al. 2008b, 27). In these situations, governments and other actors typically pay attention to the apparent success of other countries’ policy models. Policies that seem to work elsewhere are also more likely to cause leaders to positively revise their prior beliefs about their likelihood of success at home (Simmons et al. 2008b, 29).

Although the authors admit that learning is always influenced by a number of factors, including the source of new information and how it is processed (Simmons et al. 2008b, 27), they emphasise that international institutions are still essential conduits for policy learning. IOs, either as agents or as sets of rules, appear to have had important effects on information flows and policy transmission. They shape and filter the policy relevant information that is utilised by policymakers in the nation-states (Simmons et al. 2008b, 30).

The global diffusion of basic education has also been studied from this perspective. However, in contrast to the literature reviewed by Simmons and colleagues, in the studies examining policy learning in basic education the term ‘learning’ is mainly equated with the term ‘transfer’. That is to say, instead of constructing learning as the process by which one’s knowledge of what works elsewhere changes one’s beliefs as to what could work somewhere else, too, the scholars active in the field of policy learning typically aim to show how policymakers have drawn lessons from other countries’ examples and how policies thus move from one place to another. Hence, the crucial questions posed in this literature also differ from those posed by more conventional learning theorists. For instance, instead of depicting processes in which individuals add new data to prior knowledge and beliefs to revise their behaviour accordingly12, the

12 In this context, Simmons and colleagues (2008b, 26) often refer to the process of Bayesian updating, to a model according to which with each new data point, the range of hypotheses that might explain all accumulated data may shift and narrow. The more consistent the new data, the more likely an actor’s probability estimates of the truth of various hypotheses are to converge on a narrow range of
scholars active in educational learning research typically ask what types of education policies seem to be borrowed, why these are borrowed, how the borrowing takes place (to what extent) and who the primary agents are in the transfer processes.13

**Emulation**

According to Simmons and colleagues (2008b), emulation is a mechanism of diffusion drawn particularly from sociological research that emphasises that borrowing or learning takes place within a shared set of meanings as to appropriate social actors, societal goals and the means for achieving these (31–32). By this, Simmons and colleagues particularly refer to the neo-institutionalist ‘world polity’ theory developed by John Meyer and colleagues. This theory emphasises that it is this logic of appropriateness that has diffused around the globe, first in the West and then elsewhere, thus creating a unity they call ‘the world polity’. According to Simmons and colleagues, this sociological approach that is markedly constructivist in nature is distinguished from materialist and individualist theories since its primary focus is on the inter-subjectivity of meaning (Simmons et al. 2008b, 32). That is to say, the theory underlines that both legitimate ends and appropriate means are, in essence, shared social constructs (John W. Meyer et al. 1997).

One of the key arguments made in the world polity theory is that a wide variety of ideas and values is shared worldwide defining what a ‘normal’ or appropriate nation-state looks like (John W. Meyer 2000; 2004; 2007; John W. Meyer et al. 1997). These values or ‘world cultural models’ when suffusing the international sphere become key components of the institutional environment surrounding and constituting nation-states. In consequence, global ideas and policy models diffuse (Schofer et al. 2009; Strang and Meyer 1993).

In fact, according to world polity theorists, the very idea of a nation-state is a product or creation of a world culture. According to Meyer (2004), modern world society and unfettered media liberate countries to adopt standardised rights and responsibilities internationally and at home. ‘They press countries to conform to notions of the ’proper’ nation, with principles such as economic efficiency, peaceful cooperation, democracy and human rights (John W. Meyer 2004, 43).’

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13 For a the comprehensive review of the existing policy learning literature in education, see e.g. Steiner-Khamsi 2004.
The global standardisation of education has also been studied from these perspectives (John W. Meyer 1992; John W. Meyer & Ramirez 2000; John W. Meyer et al. 2007; John W. Meyer et al. 1977; John W. Meyer et al. 1992; Schofer & Meyer 2005). According to Meyer (2004) schools, which many claim to reflect each nation’s unique cultural and economic needs, turn out to be strikingly similar across the world. Enrollments from primary schools to universities expand at similar rates in different types of countries, too (John W. Meyer 2004). Curricula and textbooks tend to be similar, too, and to change in similar ways (e.g. McEneaney & Meyer 2000; John W. Meyer 2004; Schissler & Soysal 2004). One of the main reasons presented for such world standardisation of education is that national education systems originate and become institutionalised in national societies that aspire to development and progress along quite standard lines. According to Meyer and Ramirez (2000, 112), ‘[s]tandardized education arises then as an agreed upon core feature of development and progress as well as a crucial instrument intended to attain these transnationally legitimated goals’.

Like policy learning theorists, world polity scholars also emphasise that IOs play a crucial role in policy diffusion processes. According to Meyer and Ramirez (2000, 117), the rapid diffusion of modern institutions such as education is enhanced by the worldwide integration of the educational sciences and professionals but increasingly also by the IOs that carry this material providing detailed models of a proper national educational system.

In common with other diffusion theories, the world polity approach also emphasises the role of the successful economies in spreading global policy models. That is to say, policies that are associated with successful economies and societies tend to spread. In this context Meyer (2004, 46) presents the Japanese business organisation as an example and argues that Japanese forms of business organisation were seen as curiosities and were not copied in the early post-World War II decades. However, when the Japanese economy later took off, many professional and scientific analysts and associations began to imitate these organisations. Now that the Japanese economy has stalled, according to Meyer the discussion on the Japanese success model has slowly subsided.

According to Simmons and colleagues (2008b, 37) countries can also emulate their peers to which they believe they have socio-cultural linkages. For instance, Britain looks to North America for policy options, whereas Syria looks to Saudi Arabia. According to the authors, a region may also stand for such a legitimate reference group. That is to say, among adjacent countries, it is the physical proximity that can predict the influence of one country on another. (38). Third, according to Simmons and colleagues, countries also look to structural equivalents when evaluating best possible policy options (Simmons et al. 2008b, 38).
Limitations of the existing approaches

I believe that all the above-mentioned theories contribute to our understanding of how global policy models and ideas spread across the globe. Although for those involved in educational policy such direct coercion is rare, as also is conditioning, because traditionally education is not among those policy areas in which reform is required, for example, in return international loans or membership of organisations, yet it can be argued that IOs play a crucial role in disseminating ideas of what the desirable education systems are and how these could be achieved. In a similar vein, IOs set standards for poorly performing countries for how to develop their education systems. For instance, by measuring the cross-curriculum competences of the teenagers in different member and partner countries, the OECD ranks the countries by the scores achieved. On the basis of this comparison, the OECD carries out benchmarking exercises and ascertains which countries should serve as the world’s educational examples. By identifying positive examples or best practices, it also sets goals for countries performing poorly in PISA. This method of governance, also called ‘the OECD technique’ (Wallace 2000), is an efficient tool for guiding policies in individual member states. Instead of imposing sanctions on laggards, its effectiveness is based on a form of peer review (Pagani 2002) or naming and shaming (Mahon & McBride 2008; 2009), as no member country wants to be seen as the worst in a given policy area.

In designing their policies nation-states typically also look to other countries, particularly to those that seem to fare well in international comparisons, in order to draw lessons. They may also emulate their physical neighbours in order improve their systems. Nation-states also look for advice from countries with which they believe they have structural similarities as has been shown, for instance, by Swedish and German researchers (Ringarp & Rothland 2010).

Competition between states indubitably also has a role to play in these processes. The level of education in a nation is typically perceived to be a value or capital which guarantees the competitiveness of the nation-state in the future and which possibly also serves to attract international investment. Thus education and high quality in education are also among the values which are often invoked nationally in calling for changes to existing systems.

However, policy diffusion as it is understood in the above-mentioned theories does not tell anything about the processes in which interdependent decision-making takes place in actual practice. None of the theories depict the ways in which global policy models enter national spheres and how they are integrated with the domestic political argumentation. If anything, as I have said earlier, policy diffusion theorists identify coercion, competition, learning and emulation as plausible explanations for policy diffusion. Yet the assumptions about the causal mechanisms presented for policy
diffusion are based on circumstantial evidence, and how actors actually arrive at their conclusions remain a black box.

In this dissertation my aim is to fill in this gap in the research and study how interdependent decision-making takes place in actual practice. Pre-eminently, I examine how different actors or stakeholders in the Finnish nation-state context use and utilise PISA and the ideas it mediates when debating Finnish education. I also study how PISA, after being accepted locally, merges with the interests of the local actors, thus structuring domestic education policy debates.

To study these local processes, I complement here the existing theories with the domestication framework. Unlike the existing approaches, this framework opens up the actual processes and practices through which interdependent decision-making takes place. The approach focuses primarily on the role of local actors in introducing and incorporating global policy ideas into the local context. Additionally, it examines how national policies, having become involved with models of global policy, become synchronised with each other.

**Policy diffusion through domestication**
The domestication framework in the nation-state context has been developed particularly by Pertti Alasuutari and his research group, of which, I, too, am a member. In our view, the domestication of policy models in the context of nation-states refers particularly to a process in which existing routines and practices within the nation-state are challenged through the introduction of ‘new’ exogenous policy models. In these processes new models and ideas are brought into the local context so that they are adjusted to local conditions. As an outcome, models are realised as actual practices, so that they also eventually become a self-evident part of the local ‘house rules’. That is to say, after being adopted, the exogenous origin of the models and ideas gradually disappears and they come to be seen primarily as ‘domestic’ (e.g. Alasuutari 2009, 67–68; Alasuutari et al. 2013a; Alasuutari et al. 2013b; Qadir & Alasuutari 2013; Syväterä & Alasuutari 2013).

Like the theories discussed above, the domestication framework also acknowledges the role of IOs in the standardisation of policies. In our view, too, IOs, particularly IGOs, through their comparisons play a significant role in the processes where global social change and eventually world standardisation policies take place. However, the domestication framework criticises the idea that is often present in the existing diffusion theories according to which there are some power relations between nation-states or IOs that have the authority to steer national policies. We argue that such an understanding of power originates from the idea of power in the state framework, according to which
there are some dominant actors inside the nation-states that can impose their will on others thus steering national policies. According to domestication thinking, this kind of understanding of power as a hierarchical structure, i.e. as one’s property or privilege to impose its will on others, is easily transferred from the state level to the global level by arguing that as within the nation-states, at the global level, there are also some authoritative actors that can determine the direction of future policies. We contend that such an understanding of power does not hold in contemporary societies. If anything, in our view, the contemporary society must be defined in a global framework and this world society consists of nation-states that are managed increasingly through epistemic governance. Governance of this sort works by making actors perceive the world and the current challenges similarly (Alasuutari et al. 2013a; Alasuutari & Qadir, forthcoming).

The domestication framework stresses that social change in individual nation-states is among other things propelled by cross-national comparisons and by reforms justified by these, through which changes in separate states are synchronised while the global system consisting of nation-states is maintained (Alasuutari et al. 2013a; Alasuutari & Qadir, forthcoming). By defining best practices or appropriate policies, IGOs devise worldwide models that are further assumed and utilised by local actors when they ponder the status of national systems. These policy models or ideas as promoted by the IGOs are not, however, divorced from the nation-states and their needs. If anything, they arise in processes in which IGOs, mostly on nation-states’ own initiatives, launch research projects and programmes to work out the present and future challenges of modern societies. This is the case with the OECD’s educational programmes, too (see e.g. Laukkanen 2004; 2010; Papadopoulos 1994). As a result international research, projects come about and their outcomes are used by the local actors to improve domestic policies and practices.

In these processes, in which international scientific knowledge is used to influence national policy choices, I suggest, power is not a property or prerogative of some authoritative actor, but rather the action or an ability of an actor, in this case of the IGOs, to influence the comportment of individuals by acting upon their wishes and desires. This kind of epistemic work includes a variety of actors, not only IGOs or Non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which, through their knowledge production, affect the ways in which we perceive society but also local stakeholders who constantly aim at affecting other parties’ conceptions of reality as well as the views of appropriate or necessary policy decisions. In these processes domestic stakeholders refer to the practices already in use in the domestic context and to the international comparative data to advocate their standpoints (Rautalin & Alasuutari 2009). Consequently, policy ideas of global origin mesh with the interests and objectives of the local actors thus becoming integrated into the domestic policy discourses.
This being so, unlike the existing theories, the domestication framework underscores the active and creative role of local actors in translating global ideas into local contexts. By the active and creative role of the local actors we refer particularly to the policy struggles and skirmishes that calls for various reforms in the domestic contexts may trigger, struggles in which not only those promoting new policies but also other interested actors take part in, suggesting how to interpret and apply the global ideas to local conditions. These national policy skirmishes or ‘field battles’ as described by Alasuutari (2011b), are pivotal since they eventually also determine the direction the policies are to take in an individual nation-state. The final policy outcome depends on this field battle, in which all kinds of counter-discourses are mobilised to negotiate the form the reform will take. As emphasised earlier, the end result may consequently be a far cry on the original ideals and there may be considerable differences between different countries in which the same model has been introduced.

In contrast to the existing theories, the domestication framework also stresses the point that although domestic policymaking is in many ways informed by choices made in other countries, paradoxically it does not undermine but rather reproduces people’s identification with the nation as sovereign entity. Alasuutari argues that in situations where nation-states watch other countries and practices that seem to work in other countries’ contexts, they yet do not construct themselves as conformists or imitators. If anything, national policymaking is generally viewed as independent acts of the state, and the policies are considered to be domestically shaped. Consequently, they are not regarded as inauthentic copies from elsewhere or as superimposed limits on people’s freedom and sovereignty but rather as signs of a national trajectory (Alasuutari 2013; see also Alasuutari & Qadir, forthcoming).

This banal nationalist understanding of the nation as an independent unity is according to the domestication framework invoked particularly in situations in which the nation is constructed as a team engaged in competition with other countries. This framework of competition constructs the citizens of the state as a team with shared interests. Therefore doing what others are doing is not presented as conformism or imitation but rather as part of ‘local competition strategy’ (Alasuutari 2013, 107–08).

Second, the sense of localism is reinvigorated through the local political struggles that the introduction of comparative data or reforms justifying them triggers. ‘When local actors are the key players both in introducing a model and in taking part in the struggles, the whole process is commonly perceived as part of domestic politics, and the eventual form that potential reforms assume are attributed as victories or losses to the domestic powers involved (Alasuutari 2013, 108).’

This kind of understanding of power in contemporary societies that is promoted in the domestication framework is closely related to Foucault’s dislocation theory of
power. According to Foucault, power in modern societies should be conceived of not as a property but as a strategy, and ‘a network of relations constantly in tension, in activity, rather than a privilege that one might possess’ (Foucault 1977, 26). According to Foucault, ‘these relations go right down into the depths of society, that they are not localized in the relations between the state and its citizens or on the frontier between classes and that they do not merely reproduce, at the level of individuals, bodies, gestures and behavior, the general form of the law or government’ (Foucault 1977, 27). If anything, these power relations are ambiguous. ‘[T]hey are not univocal; they define innumerable points of confrontation, focuses on instability, each of which has its own risks and conflict, of struggles, and of an at least temporary inversion of the power relations’ (Foucault 1977, 27). By this Foucault meant that power should not be conceived of in terms of a hierarchical structure with the king at the top (Foucault 1980). Rather, as emphasised in the domestication thinking, the present-day society must be defined as a dislocated network of actors that attempt to govern by acting upon people’s aspirations and beliefs (Alasuutari & Qadir, forthcoming).

If we contemplate the processes of global social change from the perspective of Foucault’s thinking, we may argue that power is everywhere, not merely in the transnational networks but also in the local contexts. Power can be found wherever individuals are engaged in negotiations defining what would be the appropriate rationalities or necessary policy decisions. However, depending on individuals’ social standing, the voices of some actors gain more attention in the public discourse than others, thus having a greater impact on national policies. Yet, in all these processes, each interpretation or argument shapes the understanding of desirable systems in its own image. Each interpretation also serves as a basis for new interpretations that again direct the reactions of actors participating in the debate.

I claim that the role of the OECD PISA study in Finnish education policy can well be described by combining the existing diffusion theories with domestication thinking. By ranking different nation-states according to their educational performance, through PISA, the OECD creates images of desired education policies, of practices that are typically in use in well-performing countries. These images are assumed and eagerly referred to in the nation-state contexts when local actors ponder the status of national education systems. Policymakers, educational experts and other stakeholders in the domestic sites exploit PISA and the interpretations made of it when defending their policy proposals. Consequently, the ideas and values promoted in PISA travel into national spheres thus contributing to the synchronisation of national policies.

Although domestic policymaking seems to be in many ways informed by choices made in other countries, particularly by those in use in well performing countries, domestic actors do not construct themselves as copycats. If anything, they capitalise on
comparisons when aiming to develop their own systems, systems that they perceive as something authentic, the primary purpose of which is to serve domestic needs. In these processes, policy choices served by international comparisons are typically considered to be rational choices, choices that are determined by the dynamics of ‘modernization’ (Alasuutari 2011b) and that are thus worth adopting. It could be argued that local actors refer to PISA and policies in use in other countries since the models and ideas PISA mediates are considered proof that a nation-state acts rationally and that it wants to ‘keep up with the times’.

In these processes, where domestic actors make use of international comparative data to develop their own systems, actors’ own political desires are always also involved. Local actors do not just react to exogenous policy models in order to promote the best interests of their own country. If anything, they resort to international comparative data to further their own objectives in domestic politics. Through considered rhetoric local players direct their fellow citizens’ attention to policies in use in other countries or to practices already existing in their own country’s context, thus constructing distinct models or presenting evidence of their success. Through these local accounts, global policy ideas mesh with the interest and motives of the local actors whereby the exogenous origin of the idea originally put forward in the global context disappears and they become to be seen primarily as domestic. The new policy may even be considered a characteristic feature of the nation and promoted to other countries, hence reproducing the cycle of global social change.

**Results**

*Domestic field battles defining Finnish education policy*

In this dissertation I set out to study the role of PISA in Finnish education policy. I approached the question bottom-up by analysing how different stakeholders in Finland make use of PISA when they discuss the state of national education.

Drawing on the findings of the individual case studies, I claim that the OECD is not a true actor in the Finnish education policy field. If anything, I argue, the OECD influence is mediated via the national field, i.e. through the policy debates PISA triggers in the local contexts and to which various stakeholders aim to respond when they promote their policy objectives. National actors may borrow the prestige of the OECD when they are members of different OECD bodies. However, these actors when active in the domestic field always act in the role they represent domestically.
For instance, government officials in the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture and the Finnish National Board of Education certainly have links with the OECD and roles as Finland’s representatives in the organisation. Indeed, as I emphasise in my case studies (Rautalin & Alasuutari 2007; 2009), it is partly through their links and connections that global and national scales are intertwined. Yet it can be argued that in the national political decision-making process none of the actors speak in the name of the OECD. When national actors discuss national education and the directions it ought to take, their views always represent the interests of that interest group to which they consider themselves to belong.

Drawing on my findings, I suggest that in the processes in which Finnish education policy is formed, the primary actors are the domestic stakeholders, i.e. the debates PISA has triggered and in which PISA is referred to when local actors defend their policy objectives. In these debates understandings of the status of Finnish education are constructed the aim of which is to convince the other negotiating parties of the appropriate or necessary policy solutions. Moreover, stakeholders have recourse to PISA when seeking to consolidate political positions in the domestic field.

As to specific uses of PISA, my analysis showed that the Finnish teaching profession used PISA to defend the high quality work done by Finnish teachers. Moreover, the profession used PISA when championing Finnish teachers’ university level education. One of the main arguments built by the profession was that Finland’s success in PISA was due to the high level of education and work ethic of teachers. Moreover, the profession aimed to challenge the interpretation firmly rooted in the national public according to which Finland’s success in PISA was due to the country’s successful education policy. The profession claimed that the success was attributable to the selfless work done by the teachers and that unless reforms were undertaken Finland would soon compromise its learning outcomes in future comparisons. These arguments, of course, were intended to reinforce the status of the Finnish teaching profession and to achieve in increase in the investments allocated to Finnish education.

The uses of PISA by the government officials were also biased in the sense that they supported the interests of the Finnish central administration. Unlike the teaching profession, the government officials mainly used PISA to defend the decisions already taken by the Finnish central administration. For instance, the officials argued that Finland’s high PISA ranking was due to the national comprehensive school system and the reform in the education of Finnish teachers introduced in 1970s. Furthermore, officials highlighted other features of Finnish education intended to convince the public of how special the Finnish education system is from the international perspective. Secondly, as in the teachers’ accounts, potential deficiencies existing in Finnish comprehensive schooling were also highlighted. However, as opposed to the teachers,
the officials mainly blamed Finnish teachers and the Finnish municipalities for some of the shortcomings in the national education PISA had brought to the fore.

In the Finnish media, PISA was discussed widely and in several distinct contexts. Nonetheless, in their reporting on PISA, the media particularly stressed the interpretation according to which the Finnish education system is internationally acknowledged and successful. In the media this was rendered comprehensible through references to Finnish government officials’ and other experts’ accounts of PISA. Potential deficiencies in Finnish basic education were also noted. However, in contrast to the teachers’ and officials’ accounts, neither in the news stories nor in the letters to the editor was a grand design constructed how to improve Finnish education in the future. If anything, the Finnish reporting on PISA mediated an understanding of Finnish education being successful and when there are shortcomings in Finnish basic education these should be remedied in order to do even better in future comparisons.

**PISA structuring Finnish education policy debates**

This said, I do not mean that the OECD does not have a role in Finnish education policy. If anything, as I have said earlier, PISA plays a role through the debates it triggers and by setting frames within which education can be discussed locally. It can be argued that all stakeholders that want to take part in the Finnish education policy debate need to take a stand on PISA and the facts it constructs. This is probably an easier task for some parties than for others. I suggest that in the light of Finland’s PISA results it was fairly easy for the Finnish government officials to justify the felicity of the reforms introduced so far by the Finnish central administration, whereas the Finnish teaching profession needed to find other ways to convince the public of their standpoints. In this project of epistemic reassurance, in which the various negotiating partners seek to convince each other of what the state of the nation’s education is and how it should possibly be further developed the role of rhetoric, and especially of knowledge of the national political culture, is highly significant. It is not enough to build a rhetorically logical argument. One also needs to recognise the values or premises that are shared nationally to make the argument convincing. Based on the findings of the case studies, it can be argued that in the Finnish nation-state context such default values seem to be particularly the well-being of the nation, particularly of teenagers, and safeguarding of Finland’s reputation as the world’s leading nation in education in the future.

In addition to setting limits on how and within which frames education can be discussed locally, PISA affects national education policymaking through the discourses it establishes and institutionalises locally. This can be seen particularly
in the media analysis conducted within this dissertation. As PISA revealed that the Finnish education system is of higher quality than expected, the public discussion in Finland did not focus on the workings of the central government. Instead, the media highlighted the unexpected success of Finnish education and the potential reasons behind it. Consequently, in Finland a curriculum reform was introduced by the central government despite its seemingly inconsistent nature. That is, as PISA did not constitute any serious cause for criticism, the media made no mention of the actions of governmental officials, thereby leaving the officials and decision-makers free to continue their reform work uninterrupted.

IGOs such as the OECD can also influence national policies through the catchwords they introduce. This seems be the case with PISA, too. Once these buzzwords have been coined, they become difficult to avoid. The term ‘top performer’ introduced by the OECD is a good example of such a catchword. The term top performer was widely used by the OECD to refer to the group of teenagers achieving the highest possible score in the PISA assessments.\footnote{Besides using a term top performer the terms ‘high performer’ and ‘strong performer’ were also used by the OECD to refer to the group of teenagers achieving the highest possible score in the PISA tests.} Yet my case analysis revealed that the term top performer is also widely used by Finnish stakeholders. For instance, in the national PISA reports the term top performer was used to argue that despite the high overall performance level of Finnish teenagers, the Finnish system does not produce enough top performers. In the report it was argued that in Finland the best pupils did not reach the standard one might have expected given the high average level (Kupari & Välijärvi 2005, 228). In this context, in the report, the challenge was particularly aimed at Finnish teachers, who should create better pedagogical solutions to better serve the most gifted students.

The term top performer was actively used in the Finnish media, too. For example, in the letters to the editor in Helsingin Sanomat Finnish teachers of mathematics bemoaned the state of mathematical knowledge claiming that the teaching in mathematics offered in the comprehensive school system did not sufficiently support the solving of complex mathematical problems. According to the teachers this particular skill was not measured in PISA. The teachers claimed that in the national teaching of mathematics undue emphasis on solving numerical problem was nevertheless a threat to national top excellence and so to the country’s competitiveness. In other words, the mathematics teachers used top performers (actually the alleged lack of them) as a political asset when demanding more resources for Finnish mathematics teaching.

In many instances the terms originally proposed by IGOs become take root in the domestic settings so that their exogenous origin is only barely identifiable to the local actors. This would also appear to be the case with the term top performers. For instance,
a quick glance through the Helsingin Sanomat’s news archive revealed that the term top performer particularly used in PISA had taken root in the Finnish context. In 1999, when PISA assessments had not even started, the ‘top performer’ as a search term produced no hits in the news data, whereas the number of hits regarding the data of 2004 was 42. But then, in 2009 there were 19 references to top performers in the news data whereas the number of references for 2001–2008 varied between 24 hits and 42 hits. In many news stories, top performers were discussed in contexts with absolutely no reference to the OECD or PISA. That is to say, the term top performer widely used in PISA was taken on board by the local actors so that its global origin for many individuals was scarcely recognisable. It could be then argued that the catchwords, after taking root, move from something to think about into something to think with (Alasuutari and Qadir forthcoming). Consequently, they also become connected to issues that are in no way connected to their original context.

In the national PISA reports, too, the interpretation according to which top performers are fewer in Finland given the general level of performance than for example in many countries doing well in PISA, and that their number in Finland should therefore be increased, appears in many journalistic texts in such a way that the whole idea apparently originated primarily from the national deliberations and not, for example, from PISA, where the observation about the relatively small number of top performers was originally made. In other words, the concept originally brought forward in the global context has become naturalised in the domestic settings so that its global or transnational origin has become blurred and it is commonly perceived as a national innovation.

Discussion

Besides examining the role of PISA in Finnish education policy, in this dissertation, I also set out to examine the mechanisms on which the influence of the IGOs is based. Drawing on the findings obtained in individual case studies, I suggest that the OECD influences national policies by acting upon local actors’ hopes and desires. By ranking countries according to scores achieved in PISA, the OECD sets standards for desirable and efficient national education systems. These understandings of what seems to be desirable or efficient are absorbed by nation-states when they design their policies. Countries that have performed poorer than expected in PISA easily seek

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15 In Finnish: ‘huippuosaaja’.
advice from countries that have performed well in the comparison to learn lessons. The understandings of desirable national education systems are easily adopted by well performing countries, too. In these countries, as I have shown in my case study (Rautalin forthcoming), by the good results achieved in international assessments national actors justify the functionality of existing systems, although these good results are also used to substantiate the need for changes to the existing systems in order to do even better in future comparisons. Through these local applications, globally shared images of desirable national education systems and practices become taken for granted in national contexts.

This is, however, a different thing than to claim that the OECD was harmonising national policies. If anything, I suggest, the OECD synchronises them. By offering information on policies and systems which would appear to operate best internationally, PISA has aroused interest worldwide. Nation-states would appear to have reacted to this information simultaneously. However, due to the varied natures of local field battles, nation-states may end up introducing quite different policy reforms. As I have shown in the media analysis, PISA can even make possible national reforms totally devoid of any direct connection to the international assessment. Due to the positive public image of Finnish education and education policy as successful and reliable, and the absence of any public consensus on which particular factor best explained Finland’s high scores in PISA, the work of Finnish decision-makers and reformers was not questioned in the national public. In other words, in the Finnish nation-state context PISA ensured domestic decision-makers a peace to pursue their work. Without specific opposition from the public politicians and other actors responsible for the national curriculum reform could pursue their objectives and continue uninterrupted with the work they claimed to be nationally justified (Rautalin, forthcoming).

I hope that with this dissertation I have also made a convincing argument concerning power in contemporary societies. Contrary to what is generally believed, I suggest that power in democratic societies is not a matter of hierarchical dictating but epistemic. That is to say, apart from the use of sheer force with no other objective than removing an obstacle, all power relations can be viewed from the perspective of epistemic governance (Alasuutari & Qadir, forthcoming), although governance working on people’s beliefs and desires is more easily discernible.

The work accomplished by the OECD is a prime example of this kind of power. To actors who use the OECD data when making their arguments, the organisation seldom appears as a coercive body. If anything, actors refer to comparisons in order to learn what kind of policy seems to work best from the international perspective. Additionally, they refer to comparisons in order to muster support for their own political endeavours. For this reason, local actors do construct themselves as constrained. If anything, they
feel that they can learn from the comparisons to develop their own systems, systems that they still perceive as something organic, the primary purpose of which is to serve domestic needs. In these processes, where international comparative data is integrated with domestic policy discourse, I argue, national policies become synchronised with the trajectories of global social change while the global system consisting of sovereign nation-states is maintained.

References


ORIGINAL ARTICLES
The Curse of Success: the impact of the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment on the discourses of the teaching profession in Finland

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ABSTRACT In the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which is an international comparative learning assessment measuring young people’s knowledge and skills, Finland has been ranked at the top in the two rounds conducted and reported so far. In this article, the authors examine the discourses within which Finland’s PISA results have been interpreted by the teaching profession in Finland, and how these interpretations of Finland’s PISA success together with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s PISA may affect national education policy in the future. The main question posed is how do teachers interpret excellence so as to support their attempt to improve their working conditions, when the international success of Finnish education could also be used as proof that all is well. The data comprise editorials published in the official organ of the teachers’ trade union in Finland, Opetus-lehti. The analysis shows that in the editorials, success is explained mainly by the expertise of Finnish teachers and their university education. However, the editorials also argue that there is a discrepancy between the good PISA results and the present meagre investments in the education system, the deteriorating school network and the poor appreciation of the education system in Finland. Thus, the editorials use the national PISA results to demand more resources for the Finnish education system.

Introduction

Finland has recently been basking in educational glory due to its achievements in various comparative surveys of educational attainment in comprehensive schools. The recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study, led by the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), has turned the Finnish education system and, more precisely, the Finnish comprehensive school system into a success story (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2001, 2004). In the study which aims to measure 15-year-old-students’ learning performance in reading literacy, mathematic literacy, scientific literacy as well as problem solving, Finnish teenagers have scored top marks in two rounds conducted and reported so far.[1]

Compared with the previous OECD indicator studies Finland has participated in, the PISA study and the results achieved in it can be considered exceptional. According to the study, the learning outcomes of Finnish comprehensive schools are excellent. Thus, especially at the government official level in Finland, it has been argued that the existing practices in national comprehensive schooling should not be altered. Rather, it has been concluded that the Finnish education system has proved exemplary in international comparison and thus can serve in many
respects as a model for those countries that have scored lower than Finland (see, for example, Laukkanen, 2005, 2006).

Considering the PISA study from the viewpoint of teachers in Finland, the national success appears interesting. Finland’s PISA results were published at a time when there was a lot of public discussion about Finnish teachers being very dissatisfied with the general appreciation of their profession and with their general working conditions. Various studies conducted in the 1990s and at the turn of the millennium reported teachers’ complaints about growing workloads, more difficult students, low pay and low overall respect for the teaching profession in Finland (see, for example, Salo & Kinnunen, 1993; Viinamäki, 1997; Simola & Hakala, 2001; Virta & Kuriikka, 2001; Syrjäläinen, 2002; Webb et al, 2004a, b). Among other things, the studies argue that teachers’ dissatisfaction is due to the insufficient economic resources in the national education system and the central educational reforms introduced in Finland in the 1990s (see, for example, Syrjäläinen, 2002; Webb et al, 2004a, b). Hence, it is interesting to see how Finnish teachers as a profession view the PISA results, in which the Finnish education system is argued to be both of high quality and efficient in international comparison.

The reactions of Finnish teachers to the national PISA success are particularly interesting from the viewpoint of the sociology of professions. In the sociology of professions it is argued that along with changes in society, the representatives of occupational groups tend to join forces and create strategies in order to ensure certain priorities for themselves in the new situation.[2] The trade union of Finnish teachers, the OAJ (the Trade Union of Education in Finland), and its official organ, Opettajaka-lihti, have been particularly active in defending teachers’ interests against societal changes in Finland.[3] Hence, the reactions of the trade union and of its official organ are particularly interesting when studying the response of the profession to the national PISA success. The analysis of Opettajak-lihti’s editorials is especially interesting in this respect: the editorials typically list the profession’s official opinions on political issues, and state officials and policy makers seek them out in the editorials.[4]

The analysis of the teaching profession’s reactions to the national PISA results is relevant, since it reveals one part of the process through which policies concerning education are to take shape in one OECD member country. In this case study, our aim is to scrutinise the impact of the OECD’s PISA study on Finnish education policy.[5] The case study is part of a larger research project entitled ‘Knowledge Production, Power, and Global Social Change: the interplay between the OECD and nation states’, which analyses the role of the OECD in global governance. We believe that although the OECD does not have any formal jurisdiction over its member countries, it has been fairly successful in directing the socio-political development in them. By giving its member countries comparative statistical information on their performance, by making recommendations about how to improve, and by applying peer pressure to the governments of its members countries (Pagani, 2002), the OECD has set the standards for desirable social development, thereby contributing to defining the future direction Western economies are to take in their development (Alasutari, 2005). Nevertheless, in contrast with other international organisations such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund or the European Union (EU), the OECD’s influence on national policies does not emanate from budgetary power or its ability to issue sanctions. If anything, its power to affect national policies, and thus the socio-political development in its member countries, is based on the quality of its advice and expertise as perceived by its member countries (see, for example, Dostal, 2004, p. 446). It has been argued that in the field of education, especially OECD indicator studies [6], which provide member states with systematic rankings on their educational performance, have become increasingly effective in creating competition between different member countries, thus affecting national education policies (see, for example, Laukkanen, 1994; Rinne et al, 2004).

Of course, the forms of governance to be adopted and the policies to be brought into play in an individual member country are always an outcome of intricate processes where the suggestions presented by the OECD and the views and interpretations of various national actors concur, thus yielding new forms of knowledge and practices. That is, the direction the policies are to take in an individual OECD member country is never attributable to one single actor. Rather, the totality is always an outcome of a dense network of social relations and material conditions, coupled with conflicting and converging definitions of the situation.
In order to identify the impacts of the OECD's PISA study on the decisions to be made in Finnish education policy and how the reactions of the teaching profession contribute to them, we pose the following research questions: What are the discourses used in the editorials of Opettaja-lehti when the national PISA results are discussed? How are the interpretations of the PISA results and their implications used to justify the policy measures proposed?

The OECD is a much-cited international intergovernmental organisation (IGO), but its role in global governance has been only poorly understood. In the field of education, there are studies that discuss the impact of the OECD on national education policies, but these studies analyse the role of the OECD only indirectly (see, for example, Vickers, 1994; Henry et al., 2001; Rinne, 2004, 2006; Rinne et al., 2004; Kallo, 2006; Niukko, 2006a, b). Most of these studies attempt to show policy convergence either by analysing official government interviews or by comparing the recommendations given in OECD reports and national reforms. However, the actual mechanisms explaining the impact of the OECD ideas and recommendations on the decisions made at the national level have not been studied. In an earlier article published in this journal, Risto Rinne et al. (2004) argue that the OECD has had a major influence on Finnish education policy (p. 475). The way they arrive at this conclusion is to highlight the problems, criticisms and recommendations that the organisation has put forward and pointed out to Finland in its periodic country and thematic reviews, and to contrast these with the reforms actually realised in the Finnish education sector. However, based on the analysis presented in the article, it does not become evident whether the reforms carried out in Finland are due to the influence of the OECD education policy, caused by domestic challenges, or are because other international organisations have pursued similar ideas.

In this particular case study analysing the impact of the OECD's PISA study on Finnish education policy, our aim is to probe the very roots of social change in one OECD member country. By analysing the ways in which the results of the OECD's PISA study are used by the OAJ, in this case in the editorials of Opettaja-lehti, our aim is to show how these interpretations are likely to contribute to future decisions in national comprehensive education.

The present article is organised as follows: first, we present the empirical data, methods and theories used in the study. Second, we briefly discuss the results achieved by Finland in the PISA study. Then, we move on to examine the four ways in which the national PISA success and the potential causes of it have been interpreted in the editorials of Opettaja-lehti. Finally, we discuss how the interpretations presented in the editorials of Opettaja-lehti are likely to change Finnish comprehensive education and whether these changes will serve the interest of Finnish teachers.

The Data, Methods and Theories

The Status of the Empirical Data

The empirical data used in the study consist of editorials published in Opettaja-lehti during the period January 2001 to October 2005. The results of the first round of the PISA study, that is to say of PISA 2000, were published on 12 December 2001, whereas the results of the second round, of PISA 2003, came out on 7 December 2004. The empirical material therefore covers not only the time between the two studies but also a period of almost one year both before and after the publication of the PISA results. This is significant inasmuch as our aim is to show how the discourses within which teachers in Finland discuss their professional standing have changed as a consequence of the national PISA success. With the analysis of the editorials we are not able to encompass the whole gamut of Finnish teachers' views or opinions in relation to the PISA results. This is not even our objective. Rather, our aim is to analyse the discursive frames within which the national PISA results have been interpreted by the official organ of the trade union, Opettaja-lehti, and how these interpretations may affect the decisions to be made concerning comprehensive education in Finland. As noted in the introduction, due to its long and close connections to the trade union, Opettaja-lehti has played a significant role in determining the direction of the national education system. Therefore, it is interesting and important to study its role, particularly in introducing to the agenda viewpoints that serve the interests of teachers as a profession.
The Theoretical and Methodological Framework

The methodological approach used in this study can be characterised as discourse analysis. We refer to the term 'discourse' as defined and used by Michel Foucault (1972). According to Foucault, discourse can be defined not only as a group of signs or statements (signifying elements referring to contents or representations) belonging to the same discursive formation, but also as a practice that systematically forms the objects of which it speaks. Thus, the term 'discourse' refers not only to the use of signs designating things, but also to the 'more' that renders them irreducible to language and to speech. According to Foucault, the central object of analysis is exactly this 'more', which needs to be revealed and described (Foucault, 1972, pp. 55, 131). Foucault's characterisation of discourses looks at language use not only from the viewpoint of meaning – i.e. how signs designate things – but also from the viewpoint of action – i.e. how signs also form and affect the reality in which they are used.

The productive nature of discourses in Foucault's theory is also closely related to the emphasis that knowledge and power are intertwined and affect each other reciprocally. Power, in this sense, does not refer only to repression – i.e. to a person's (or institution's) ability to carry out his or her will – regardless of resistance (Weber, 1978, p. 926). Rather, it is seen as productive in a broader sense – i.e. as a network of dominance entangled with knowledge and with manifold subject positions and identities of the actors involved (Foucault, 1972, 1980; Alasuutari, 1996, pp. 18-22; 2004, pp. 34-35, 69-70).

When analysing the editorial of Opettaja-lehti, we therefore pay attention not only to the discursive frames within which the national PISA results are interpreted, but also to the various identities and subject positions produced when the national PISA results and the potential causes of them are discussed in Opettaja-lehti. According to Foucault (1972), it is not unimportant what kind of interpretations of reality are produced in each context, because each interpretation of the situation, when materialised in organisational forms, gives rise to new discourses and forms of knowledge, which in turn affect the attitudes and practices to be adopted by the actors involved. For instance, if the national PISA success were accepted as attributable to the good planning of national education and to the felicity of the reforms carried out nationally, this may have as a consequence that the prevailing practices in national comprehensive schooling will not be altered.

In this research project, by carrying out case studies on the uses and effects of OECD knowledge production in Finland, we also aim to make a contribution to the theoretical discussion about international influence on social change in individual nation states. In this discussion, the key question is often formulated by asking whether, under what conditions and in what ways policy convergence takes place. Critical assessments of policy convergence studies and of theories and empirical studies of international institutions point out the challenges for future research and theorising. According to Bennett (1991), studies on policy convergence among advanced industrial states are often based on an overly deterministic logic, a static conception of convergence and an unclear specification of the aspects of policy that are supposed to be converging. In a similar vein, Martin & Simmons (1998) criticise earlier research for focusing on proving that institutions matter, without sufficient attention to constructing well-delineated causal mechanisms or explaining variation in institutional effects. The critics recommend that more attention be paid to domestic politics rather than treating the state as a unit (Bennett, 1991; Garrett & Lange, 1995; Cortell & Davis, 1996; Martin & Simmons, 1998; Botcheva & Martin, 2001; Kastner & Rector, 2003). This is because, if IGOs affect global social change, they do so by influencing social and political developments and decision making in nation states, and such influences presuppose mechanisms. On the other hand, the policies that the IGOs expect or recommend the nation states to implement do not come from out of the blue; the issues on the agenda are brought there by representatives of nation states. The totality is a dense network of social relations and material conditions, coupled with conflicting and converging definitions of the situation.

To capture the complex nature of the impact of IOs on a single nation state, we approach the case using the governmentality framework developed by Michel Foucault (Foucault, 1991; Rose & Miller, 1992; Dean, 1999; Rose, 1999). We not only study the OECD knowledge production and publications, but also the ways in which different actors in a member country are active in defining the OECD special projects agenda, and the way they use or make references to the OECD reports in justifying or criticising political decisions both in official documents and in the media.
The governmentality framework is useful for analysing whether the role of the OECD is due to its ability to affect the frameworks and discourses within which national economies and economic and social policies are perceived and assessed, including the criteria by which the OECD countries are compared with each other. In this continuously ongoing process, including different subject positions from OECD civil servants all the way to voters, political parties and non-governmental organisations, dominant discourses are materialised in organisational forms, which in turn give rise to new discourses and forms of knowledge.

The PISA Results for Finland

In the first two PISA Studies conducted and reported thus far Finland has been placed among the top countries (see note [1]). The PISA study has proved, among other things, that the uniformity of students' performance between different regions and between boys and girls is Finland's special forte. The differences between the strongest and weakest results in Finland are also among the smallest of the countries surveyed. According to the study, the variation in performance is only very slight between various language groups. In addition, the survey revealed that socio-economic background has a lower impact on Finnish students' performance than elsewhere in the countries surveyed (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2001, 2004). The OECD has also credited Finland for the efficiency of its education system: according to the latest OECD Education at a Glance report, in Finland the good results at the comprehensive school level are achieved with average resources in education, i.e. with average expenditure on, and time used for, education when compared with other OECD and EU countries (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2006).

However, unlike many other OECD indicator studies, the PISA study does not include any analysis of the factors contributing to country-specific results. The more specific analysis of country-specific results and the reasons contributing to them stay at the national level. In Finland, the ministry in charge of implementing the PISA study at the national level, the Ministry of Education, has so far financed and published, in collaboration with the Institute for Educational Research at the University of Jyväskylä, two, more thorough, PISA reports (Välijärvi & Linnakylä, 2003; Kupari & Välijärvi, 2005a). These reports, including ministry-level interpretations of the national PISA results and the factors contributing to them, constitute one of the basic instruments when examining the PISA study's impact on national education policy. For instance, along with the credit given to Finnish educational reforms and national teacher training, the reports also point out issues of development. The reports suggest, among other things, that the few shortcomings in the national learning performances could be remedied by considering alternative teaching methods and materials (Välijärvi et al., 2003, pp. 195-197; Kupari & Välijärvi, 2005b, pp. 229-232). Where the ministry presents its views on the national PISA results in its reports, the teaching profession aims in its own publication to bring out teachers' interpretations of the results and the reasons behind them.

The High Level of Expertise among Finnish Teachers

Considering how the national PISA results were received in the editorials of Opettaja-lehti, we observed that the attitude towards Finland's PISA results was very positive throughout the period studied. One of the main ways of coming to terms with the national PISA results was to emphasise that Finland's high ranking in the PISA assessments is due to the high level of expertise among Finnish teachers. One proof evinced is a reference to the average investments in education in Finland compared with other OECD countries:

The learning performances of Finnish comprehensive school students have again been found in an international comparison to be excellent. The OECD report 'Education at a Glance' acknowledges Finland not only for the quality of its education but also for its regional and gender equality.

Since here the costs of education are only on the OECD average, quality is achieved through good work. The results are attributable to the teachers. According to the report, Finland's
success is explained to a large extent by the university-level education of the teachers and the skill
naturally accompanying this. (Opettaja-lehti, 26 September 2003)

In the above quote, the good national PISA results are explained by Finnish teachers' high standard
of professional expertise, resulting especially from their university education. The argument that
the good results are attributable to Finnish teachers is further strengthened by the claim that
because the resources used in education in Finland are only 'on the OECD average', the PISA
success cannot be understood in any other way than as resulting from the high level of professional
expertise among Finnish teachers.

In the editorials, the link between the high national PISA ranking and the high level of
expertise among Finnish teachers is also constituted by referring to features characterising the
national comprehensive school system. It is argued that behind the good PISA results are factors
such as selectivity, the autonomy of Finnish teachers, and that teaching is pupil-driven:

The Finnish school system and Finnish schoolchildren were accorded thanks and praise in the
international evaluation, i.e. the PISA Study published in December. Young Finns were
estimated to be the best readers in the OECD countries. In mathematics and natural sciences
they were also ranked at the very top.

Sound reasons for the Finns' success is readily available: the Finnish teachers are of the highest
level, only the so-called 'A group' makes the selection, schools and teachers act independently,
and teaching is pupil-centred. (Opettaja-lehti, 18 January 2002)

The emphasis on Finnish teachers' high level of professional expertise is also used to convey the
impression that all teachers working in Finnish comprehensive schools are perfectly eligible for
their profession and that unfit teacher candidates have already been sifted out at the entrance
examination stage. The emphasis on Finnish teachers' independence is used to strengthen the
argument that Finnish teachers can make autonomous decisions. Using the individual teaching
methods as an explanation for the good learning performances refers again to the virtues created by
the Finnish teachers' training – education which has been largely acknowledged both at the
international and national levels.

By the different means used in the arguments, the editorials link the PISA success to Finnish
teachers' high level of professional expertise, produced by their university education. The main
argument evinced is that the competent and selected Finnish teachers are behind the good results –
not the successful planning of education, supportive families or even ambitious students. In this
emphasis, the editorials differ from the ministerial views, according to which the national success is
mostly attributable to the successful planning of national education. The editorials' views also differ
from the profession's earlier views. Finnish teachers have not traditionally emphasised the role of
their university education and their high level of professional expertise when defending their
professional interests in changing conditions. Rather, the current 'teacherism' evident in the
editorials was preceded by the professional identity constructed for the former elementary school
teacher. In that identity construction, it was characteristic to emphasise the vocational character of
the work and the duty to pass on knowledge to others (Rinne & Jauhainen, 1988; see also Rinne,
1988, 1989). This kind of moral discourse can also be identified in the editorials preceding the
publication of the PISA results. In these, teachers' professional interests were advocated by
appealing to the vocational nature of their work (Opettaja-lehti, 13 September 2002; 16 May 2003).
However, it could be argued that the PISA study and, along with it, the international recognition of
the Finnish school system provided teachers with a stronger tool than the emphasis on vocation to
further their professional interests.

Meagre Investments in the Education System

Another way of coming to terms with the national PISA results in Opettaja-lehti was to show that
there is a clear inconsistency between the outstanding PISA results and the investments allocated to
the education system. Related to this, the editorials express the fear that due to Finland's success in
the PISA study, decision makers might come to the conclusion that the investments allocated to
comprehensive schools should remain unchanged or even be reduced, since the system already
produces good results. Possible cuts in state subsidies especially are brought into the discussion, but
a fear about the future of the teaching of the Finnish language is also expressed. It is argued that unless the investments allocated to basic education are increased, the few shortcomings in the learning performances shown by the PISA study cannot be overcome:

In the international evaluation, the PISA Study, published in December, the Finnish school system and Finnish schoolchildren came in for thanks and praise...

In Finland the findings of the evaluation survey commanded attention at the time of publication. The decision makers took note of it in their speeches and the matter was addressed in several editorials. But then came the public holidays at the turn of the year and the matter appeared to have been forgotten. Given that the weak position of the mother tongue in our schools has long been discussed and that more resources have been demanded, the survey would appear to negate the reasons evinced for the demand. The work of the education officials in the interests of the mother tongue would appear to be going to waste and there is therefore a reluctance to flaunt the achievements of the survey, or indeed even to make mention of them.

The findings of the evaluation survey were flattering to Finland, but still do not remove the need for additional resources: the success did not permeate all subfields of the mother tongue. The survey moreover revealed that in many other subfields of education there remains work to be done, in Finland, too. (Opettajalehti, 18 January 2002)

By referring to the decision makers’ silence regarding the PISA results and to the unsuccessful efforts of state officials for the improvement of Finnish language teaching, this extract argues that the situation is paradoxical: the decision makers are willing to take the credit for the PISA results by highlighting the strengths of the comprehensive schooling institution, but they are not willing to concede its deficiencies, i.e. the lack of resources. In that way, the opposite conclusion – i.e. that the good results in international comparison show that the resources are sufficient – is rejected.

Instead of drawing the opposite conclusion that the PISA results are proof of Finnish basic education being relatively well resourced and efficient, as is emphasised in the 2006 OECD Education at a Glance report, the editorials blame insufficient resources for the few weaknesses that the national PISA reports point out. For instance, the reports suggest that the few shortcomings in the Finnish sample could be remedied by improving pedagogy and by developing teaching materials (see, for example, Väljärvi et al, 2003, pp. 195-197; Kupari & Väljärvi, 2005b, pp. 229-232), but these suggestions are not mentioned in the editorials. This is, of course, very much in line with the other main interpretation presented in the editorials, according to which the good results are due to the teachers’ high level of professional proficiency. Taking up the suggestion to consider other teaching methods and materials for better performances would have undermined that argument.

The fact that Finland excelled in the PISA study in spite of low unit costs in education was also used as grounds for demanding more resources for basic education:

If it was possible to applaud Finland and the Finnish school system by reason of the PISA Study some time ago, the recently published OECD report ‘Education at a Glance’ tells a very different story. It shows that with regard to the level of costs, Finland is well below the average for the OECD countries. Whereas the average cost of a single pupil in the entire school system is on average 6,400 Euros in the OECD countries, the corresponding figure for Finland is 6,000 Euros. This, too, provides reason to demand a full rise in unit costs...

The budget-makers should hold fast to two basic tenets: welfare and information society Finland. The young people are in a decisive position. The politicians could make funding for education and improving the financial position of students a point of honour – and not only in their pre-election and ceremonial spechifying. Finland cannot and should not compete with quantity and cheap prices; in knowledge, skills and expertise we can be among the best in the world. (Opettajalehti, 26 September 2003)

In this extract, Finnish pupils’ high level of achievement in learning skills in spite of low unit costs is not considered proof of the efficiency and good quality of the education system. Instead, the editorial takes up the low unit costs as evidence that Finland is lagging behind the OECD countries’ average. Thus, the rhetoric turns the OECD average into a norm that should be at least achieved, if
not exceeded, by raising the unit costs. In the last sentence, keeping the unit costs low is associated with ‘compet[ing] with quantity and cheap prices’, which is juxtaposed with the goal of excelling in knowledge, skills and know-how.

In the second paragraph, the requirement for more resources for education is also justified by the premise that Finland’s status as a welfare and information society must be defended. This is done by arguing that young people (education and students’ economic status) are in a crucial position in this respect.

The same theme – linking education to the defence of the welfare society – occurs in many editorials. Through this association, the editorials address the concern that the state subsidies allotted to municipalities are shared out in such a way that other municipal welfare services, such as social services and health care, receive a much bigger share than education (for example, Opettaja-lehti, 17 May 2002; 5 December: 2002; 10 September 2004). As a remedy, the editorials suggest that to ensure sufficient resources for basic education, and thus Finland’s future as a welfare society, subsidies should be earmarked for education (for example, Opettaja-lehti, 10 September 2004).

The Deteriorating School Network

One of the ways of interpreting the PISA results was also to argue that the good and homogenous learning achievements of Finnish teenagers are due to the principle of equal comprehensive education. In this context especially, the role of the extensive school network was emphasised. In this emphasis, the editorials agree with the argument presented in the national PISA report: the uniform quality of the results is due to the equal learning opportunities in Finland (Väliläri et al, 2003, p. 196). However, the editorials also argue that if the plans of the government of Finland are carried out, the high and homogenous quality of the learning achievements will be endangered. According to the concern expressed, despite the good and homogenous results achieved by Finland in the PISA study, the decision makers in the government are about to make cuts in the school network in order to cut the costs of education:

The report of the globalisation group considering the future of Finland was submitted a week ago to Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen ... In addition to labour market issues, the report addresses the importance of education and expertise to Finland’s success in the global economy. The report gives exceptional credit to teachers and teacher education, but also expresses concern about the attractiveness of teaching as a profession. After this acknowledgement, however, the report becomes critical. Just as Finland has achieved some repute in the PISA Study and other studies, there comes a call to tighten our belts. The report initially deems it positive that basic general education is within the reach of every Finn, but then requires that the network of schools be cut and studies at upper secondary level restricted. It is claimed that resources are ‘needlessly’ expended on maintaining school premises.

It is good that the report calls for improvements in the teaching aids in comprehensive schools and in the teachers’ working conditions, but paradoxical that this should be brought about by cuts in the network of schools. If we begin to thin out the network of schools, we shall be sawing off the very branch for which the globalisation work group applauds Finland: equality in education and equal access to education. Although, according to the report, the call to adapt notably concerns towns, what is left unsaid is that the schools in the remote areas have already been adapted. Apparently there is no longer any need to improve teachers’ working conditions in the schools outside the built-up areas. It seems that the praise and the demands were written by two different individuals. (Opettaja-lehti, 19 November 2004)

In this editorial commenting on the report of the working group on globalisation organised by the government of Finland, the author contrasts the praise given to Finnish comprehensive education with the recommendation that the school network should be cut in order to save on the costs of school premises. It is argued that it is illogical to both applaud the education system and to suggest cuts in it – in other words, that it would naturally follow from praising the education system that the resources must be left intact, if not increased. The editorial does not mention any of the reasons given for the proposed cuts, for instance, the fact that the age cohorts are getting smaller. Instead,
the text attempts to create the impression that good results can no longer be achieved in sparsely populated areas of Finland.

The editorials also argue that the thinner school network has caused teachers to be exhausted and increased exclusion among Finnish teenagers. It is argued that due to the cuts made in the state subsidies back in the 1990s, Finnish teachers have had enormous problems in maintaining the good quality of teaching in comprehensive schools. In addition, it is argued that due to the cuts in the school network, teenagers living in rural areas no longer have the same rights to basic education as teenagers living in urban areas of Finland. This causes inequality and exclusion among Finnish teenagers. The following quotation illustrates this argument:

The annual OECD report 'Education at a Glance' compares information on education in its 30 member countries, this time for 2003 ... According to the report, the Finnish school system achieves good results even though it expends less money than the OECD average. We are some 0.9-1.1 percentage points behind the other Nordic countries measured in terms of gross domestic product (GDP). While Sweden and Denmark have increased their investments in education, Finland has stood still.

In the last decade, Finland embarked on drastic cutbacks in teaching. Among other things, most of the state subsidies withheld have not yet been restored to the schools. The deleterious nature of these measures will manifest itself when the teachers can no longer stretch with their reduced resources. The large number of those being marginalised is one warning sign of what is to come.

The most recent group of those marginalised is those pupils whose home municipalities are prepared to cut the future with redundancies and by closing down viable schools. The quality and cover of teaching constitutes a discriminatory factor among pupils. The decision makers are unwilling to look this threat of marginalisation in the face as it is a question of money. Nevertheless, the exacerbating threat of marginalisation is to be read in the OECD report if people so wish. (Opettaja-lehti, 23 September 2003)

In this extract, the demand to raise the unit costs is linked with the argument that because of insufficient spending on education, particularly in small rural communities, young people are at risk of exclusion.

In other editorials discussing this theme, the blame is put particularly on the local municipalities, which spend money on other policy areas. As a remedy, the editorials suggest that municipal taxes be raised (for example, Opettaja-lehti, 1 February 2002; 13 June 2003) or that educational services be secured by merging municipalities (for example, Opettaja-lehti, 11 May 2001; 14 September 2001; 13 June 2003; 20 May 2005). In some editorials, the deterioration of the school network is seen as a natural consequence of migration from rural areas to urban areas but, in this context, it is suggested that a certain number of 'village schools' should be preserved, because the existence of the village schools themselves helps to prevent the increasing migration (for example, Opettaja-lehti, 10 August 2001; 4 June 2004).

Politicians' Disregard of the Problems of Education

The fourth theme that occurred in the editorials dealing with the PISA results was the argument that although Finland has excelled in PISA, Finnish decision makers have not paid much attention to education and its problems. The fact that it has not been put on the political agenda is interpreted in these editorials as a lack of appreciation for comprehensive education. The following extract illustrates this argument:

A few weeks before the parliamentary elections in Germany, schools and education have emerged as a burning issue. The OECD PISA Study placed the German schools at the bottom end of the comparative survey, and since then there has been widespread discussion on the quality and resources of education in that country. The media have been in Finland wondering at how Finland came to be ranked first in the survey and the education politicians have been asked to account for this. Opinion polls in Germany have shown that in the opinion of the German public, improving schools and day-care centres is one of the most important election issues.
Parliamentary elections will also be held in September in Sweden. There, too, a heated political debate on schools has developed, in which both the main political parties have endeavoured to raise their profiles.

In Finland, parliamentary elections will be held in the next half year, but once again it seems that the parties are not sufficiently interested in school policy and do not consider it important enough to be included among the frontline issues. ...

The politicians are not interested in the oversized teaching groups in schools, special teaching and shortage of teachers. It is highly unlikely that the question of schools will make it even into the semi-important electoral themes. (Opettaja-lehti, 30 August 2002)

This text argues that there is a disparity between Finland's high rankings in the PISA study and the assumption that politicians and political parties do not see education as an important political theme. According to this argument, because the PISA results have received much attention in other OECD countries and made education a burning political issue, the same should happen in Finland, especially because the results were so good. This expected causal logic is built on the implicit assumption that politicians should bring education to the agenda as a sign of gratitude for the teachers' good work and as an indication that they consider education an important institution. Thus, because education is not on the agenda, it is argued that politicians do not attach importance to education. In this way, the text ignores the prevailing interpretation, according to which education has become an important political issue in Germany and Sweden precisely because they have not done so well in the PISA study. Typically, it is defects and problems, especially if they are related to topics deemed important, that are brought to the political agenda.

Although the editorials of Opettaja-lehti argue that the political decision makers should bring education more strongly to the agenda because of Finland's excellent performance in the PISA study, several editorials do acknowledge that education is ignored as a political issue because the PISA triumph gives the impression that everything is fine and that education is problem-free. The following quote is an example of this:

From the perspective of Finnish education policy, an important education policy report came before Parliament one week ago. Some ten years have elapsed since the last corresponding report. ...

It is true that three years is a short time for final conclusions on the effects of the new legislation, but the present problems of education and the focal areas of the future are unpardonably bypassed in the report. The report as a whole imparts an almost glossy picture of the present state of education in schools. One could even call it laudatory, as, for example, it deems the use of lay-offs as a means of achieving savings a scourge all but overcome. ...

The importance of education to Finnish society and to the Finns surely needs no further justification. However, the further development of education needs to be placed centre-stage in the political debate. Here the report is in a significant position. ...

Since this is indeed a report, general conclusions are insufficient; there is a need for proposals for concrete measures. However, in many cases, these continue to bask in the glow shed by the general findings of the PISA Study. ...

The report sent out a totally wrong message; all is well. In the last ten years, the unit price of teaching has been brutally slashed. Recently, resources have been refunded to the municipalities, but not always reaching right to the schools. Since, once again, there is talk of tightening austerity measures, there is a real danger that the report will be an aid to cutting teaching once again. (Opettaja-lehti, 28 March 2002)

In this editorial, it is argued that the decision makers are ready to take the credit for Finland's PISA success but that they are not ready to recognise its problems. By referring to a cut in the unit costs of education made in the 1990s, the text argues that resources are scarce. The writer also expresses the fear that because the PISA success has sent out the message that Finnish comprehensive education is in an excellent condition, the government will again cut resources from education.
The same concern that education, particularly comprehensive schooling, suffers in the state and local municipal budget in comparison with other policy areas is also raised in editorials that do not include any reference to the PISA study. In these editorials, the comparison is made between education and other policy areas, especially social and health services. Opettaja-lehti argues that other areas have received more attention, whereas comprehensive schooling has gone by the board (for example, Opettaja-lehti, 2 May 2003; see also Opettaja-lehti, 23 March 2001). It is argued that because of major changes in society and because of many reforms in the education sector, education deserves more attention in politics (for example, Opettaja-lehti, 16 November 2001). It is also argued that even though education is recognised as one of the main themes in the government platforms, reviews and in budget proposals (for example, Opettaja-lehti, 2 May 2003; 5 March 2004; 27 August 2004), even then no extra money is appropriated for education, and particularly for comprehensive schooling in Finland.

All in all, by referring to the political decision makers’ disregard for education, the editorials imply that politicians do not sufficiently realise how important education, and particularly comprehensive schooling, is for the nation. In that sense, the editorials imply, education and the people working in that sector do not have the respect they deserve, particularly because the PISA study has demonstrated what good work they have done. Through that route, the logic of the argument leads to demands for more money for education as a sign of appreciation and as a reward.

Conclusion

The main question posed in this article is how did Finnish teachers as a profession interpret Finland’s number-one ranking in the PISA study in such a way that it could support their attempt to improve their working conditions, when the international success of Finnish education could also be used as proof that all is well? To reiterate the main results of the analysis, the editorials of Opettaja-lehti, the organ of the teachers’ trade union, argued that, for the most part, Finland scored high thanks to the high level of expertise among its teachers. By claiming that teachers can take the credit for Finland’s PISA results, the editorials aimed to ensure that their work will be better acknowledged and that their good training will be secured in the future. In various ways, the editorials also attacked the prevalent assumption that the PISA results are proof that Finnish basic education is in good shape. For instance, instead of considering Finnish pupils’ good achievements in learning skills in spite of low unit costs as proof of the efficiency of the education system, the editorials used the low unit costs as evidence that Finland is ‘lagging behind’ the average of the OECD countries. The editorials also included the argument that education deserves more attention and resources because of the excellent results of the PISA study as a sign of appreciation for its importance. The editorials also blamed insufficient resources for the few weaknesses that the national PISA reports point out.

All in all, in order to prevent people from seeing the good PISA results as proof of the good planning of comprehensive education in Finland, Opettaja-lehti aimed to show that there are still a number of problems to solve in Finland regarding the quality of comprehensive education: basic education is gravely under-resourced, the school network is deteriorating, and the education sector does not receive as much attention and appreciation as it does in other OECD countries. By drawing attention to these problems, the editorials bolstered the argument that there is a clear contradiction between Finland’s outstanding PISA results and the faulty planning of comprehensive education. This logic also supported the claim that the good results are down to the good work of the Finnish teachers, and that, in order to secure good results in the future too, the decision makers should deal with the problems quickly.

Interestingly, in discussing the PISA results, Opettaja-lehti did not make demands for better salaries, for an increase in teachers’ in-service training, for a decrease in their workloads, or for putting an end to fixed-term contracts. These issues were discussed in the editorials throughout the period studied but in totally different contexts. Hence, it is interesting to ask why teachers did not demand a direct reward for Finland’s PISA success, for instance, in terms of better salaries or better working conditions, particularly because it was greatly emphasised in the editorials that the success was due to the good work of Finnish teachers.
The Impact of the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment

The emphasis on organisational questions may be due to the fact that the public PISA debate, especially the ministerial views, contained much organisational or system talk. From the perspective of Opettaja-lehti, it may have been more expedient to concur with the system talk already accepted as a basic element of the public PISA discourse and put the direct trusteeship questions aside. Instead, the editorials concentrated on highlighting the problems in comprehensive education and demanding solutions to them.

It is also noteworthy that the pedagogical issues — for instance, suggestions about considering alternative learning methods and materials in teaching — taken up in the national PISA reports did not find their way into the discourses of Opettaja-lehti. This could be because, by taking up these questions, Opettaja-lehti would have weakened the assumption about Finnish teachers’ high level of professional expertise. Therefore, it was more expedient to omit the entire issue from the discussion.

The results of our analysis show quite well how the interpretations and suggested policy conclusions drawn from the PISA results by Opettaja-lehti are biased in the sense that they reflect the interests of the teaching profession. Needless to say, the same certainly goes for other actors in the process that the study has triggered in Finland and elsewhere in the world. Interpretations by various actors in the field may be more or less well grounded in the findings of the comparative study, but there are hardly any unbiased, neutral or accurate interpretations. In any case, in the final analysis, the objectivity of the interpretations is not decisive. What counts is the ability of the different actors to convince others of the relevance and importance of the points made, which may thus influence political decisions.

To return to the starting point of this study, the reason why we are interested in the PISA example is to highlight the processes through which the OECD may influence the policies adopted in its member countries. As we have emphasized, the end result is always an upshot of intricate processes giving rise to new forms of knowledge, and thus to new practices. Therefore, based on the analysis presented here, the question to be asked would be: what can be said about the contribution of the teaching profession to the changes caused by the PISA study in Finland? Unfortunately, at least at this stage of the ongoing case study, we cannot answer such a big question with any confidence or with the backing of empirical evidence. The themes taken up in the editorials of Opettaja-lehti have also been discussed in the Finnish Committee Reports for Education and Culture. However, the proposals for action in these contexts were in contrast to those presented in the editorials. For instance, the editorials of Opettaja-lehti mainly blamed insufficient resources for the slight interregional differences in the national learning performances that the national PISA reports pointed out. In the committee reports, by contrast, in the context of discussing the PISA results, the interregional differences in the national learning performances were seen as attributable to the inadequate and ineffective local evaluation of education (SIVM 6/2002 vp, 2002). In the committee reports, it was also suggested that the slight differences between Finnish boys’ and girls’ learning performances shown by the PISA study could be resolved by allocating extra resources to schools where they are badly needed (SIVM 12/2006 vp, 2006). In the editorials related to this theme, the demand was made for an increase of the overall resources in Finnish basic education. Thus, it seems that the PISA study has caused much discussion about Finnish comprehensive education — not only about its strengths, but also about its present problems — in various forums. However, the ways to handle these problems suggested by different groups of actors seem to be in contrast with each other.

On the whole, the PISA study has certainly given the teachers and other actors in the field of Finnish education a boost of confidence and the conviction that they are doing at least something right. It has also probably increased Finnish people’s respect for the teaching profession.[8] However, it remains to be seen and to be more closely studied whether, and in what ways, the PISA study has changed or will change Finnish comprehensive education, and whether these changes will serve the interests of Finnish teachers.

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Notes

[1] The OECD’s PISA is the first international learning assessment of its kind. It does not measure the contents of individual school curricula but rather to what extent students nearing the end of compulsory education have acquired some of the knowledge and skills that are essential for full participation in society (see ‘What PISA Assesses’ at http://www.pisa.oecd.org/). This is achieved by collecting information not only on student performances but also on issues affecting these performances, such as information on individual students, schools and school systems. In the first PISA study in 2000, the focus was on reading literacy. The second study conducted in 2003 focused on mathematics. The study conducted in 2006 focused on science and its results will be published on December 4, 2007. The assessment to be conducted in 2009 will again focus on reading literacy. The skills of Finnish students have been among the best in all domains assessed and reported so far. In PISA 2000, Finland finished first in reading literacy, fourth in mathematics, and third in science. In PISA 2003, Finland maintained its high level of reading literacy (first place) while further improving its performance in mathematics (first place) and science (joint first place). In the area of problem solving, which was measured for the first time in PISA 2003, Finland was placed second.

[2] On professionalisation theory and the strategies of occupational groups to attain the status of a legitimate profession and the privileges connected to it, see, for example, Sirgrist (1990) and also Berlant (1975).

[3] Considering, for instance, the role of the trade union in educational reforms in Finland in the past, the OAJ and Opettaja-lehti played significant roles in negotiations concerning the national comprehensive school and the national teacher education reform back in the 1970s. In addition, the editors-in-chief of Opettaja-lehti have played a significant role along with representatives of the trade union in a number of wage agreements concerning Finnish teachers. For a detailed history of Opettaja-lehti, see, for example, the web page of the OAJ at http://www.opettaja.fi/portal/page?_pageid=95,82039&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL.

[4] Opettaja-lehti is the oldest weekly periodical in Finland. It is the only official publication of the OAJ and therefore is read largely by various institutional actors in the national education sector. For instance, each of the 97,000 trade union members receives the magazine as a member’s benefit. In addition, every member of the Parliament of Finland and every civil servant in the National Board of Education receives the magazine. The magazine is also well read in the municipal education sector. Thus, Opettaja-lehti can be considered both a respected publication representing the views of Finnish teachers and a force to be reckoned with in political agenda setting in education in Finland.

[5] This article is based on a preliminary analysis and interpretation of the editorials of Opettaja-lehti by Marjaana Rautalin. Based on this preliminary analysis, her text has been brought into its current written form in co-operation with Pertti Alasuutari.

[6] In the field of education, central OECD publications also include country and thematic reviews.

[7] See Armégeon & Beyeler (2004) for a recent ambitious, well-theorised and well-researched study about the OECD and European welfare states, analysing the impact of the OECD on national social policies on national welfare reforms. Nevertheless, the study is a good example of the problems social scientists face when trying to show the OECD’s impact on national policies. Although the contributors to the study found remarkable concordance between OECD recommendations and national policies, they reject the hypothesis of a strong and direct impact. This is because the concordance can be due to the influence of other international organisations; the national reforms can be caused by domestic challenges; the policy changes can result from new constellations of domestic political power; and, finally, there may have been changes in economic paradigms, not only at the level of the OECD but also at the national level (see Armégeon, 2004, pp. 230-231).

[8] A recent study (Välilä, 2006) reports that unlike in many other countries, in Finland the teaching profession is highly respected. Among the public, the teaching profession is often equated with academic professions, such as physicians or lawyers. According to the study, the teaching profession has also maintained its status as one of the most popular professions among Finnish teenagers, whereas the tendency in the other European countries has been quite the opposite.
The Impact of the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment

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The Impact of the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment


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The uses of the national PISA results by Finnish officials in central government

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In this article we attempt to analyse how OECD knowledge production is integrated with the process in which Finnish education policy takes shape. This is done by analysing the uses of the OECD PISA Study by Finnish central government officials. The main question posed is: How do these officials interpret the PISA results so as to justify the decisions made in Finnish education policy in the past or to point out new areas of development concerning basic education? The analysis shows that the interpretations of the PISA results tend to favour those responsible for actions within the central government. In the texts analysed, the scientificity of the PISA programme is presented as beyond question, while the direct usefulness of the research results for the further development of national education is also proclaimed. As to the specific results of PISA, the excellent learning outcomes of Finnish students are claimed to be due to educational reforms conducted and decisions made by the central government, whereas shortcomings and areas in which the officials see a need for improvement are argued to be dependent on the actions of other agents. Thus, the analysis shows that the conclusions drawn from the PISA results in texts representing the views of central government are biased and serve to justify its policy agenda.

Keywords: OECD; PISA Study; global governance; Finnish central government officials; Finnish education policy; discourse and rhetorical analysis

Introduction

It is often argued that although the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) does not possess any formal authority over its member countries, it plays a significant role in formulating their socio-economic development (Armingeon and Beyeler 2004; Mahon and McBride 2008, 2009; Woodward 2004). By providing its member countries with comparative statistical information on their socio-economic performance, by making recommendations on how to improve, and by causing peer pressure to its member countries’ governments (Pagani 2002), the OECD has set the standards for ideal socio-economic development, thereby contributing to the ways in which Western societies understand the choices open to their policies. Thus, by creating an epistemic community (Haas 1992a, 1992b) the OECD influences national policies. However, in contrast to other international inter-governmental organisations (IGOs) such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or the European Union

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shaping domestic policies, the OECD’s steering power over its member countries does not stem from budgetary power or its ability to issue sanctions. If anything, its steering power is based on its expert position: its vast research capacity compared with others, which enables the organisation to highlight certain trends, to identify common problems and to map out a range of appropriate solutions (Mahon and McBride 2008, 10; see also Mahon and McBride 2009) which are then closely followed when the policy is made in individual member countries (Beyeler 2004; Dostal 2004; Porter and Webb 2004). This does not, of course, mean that individual nation-states have lost their power to decide about their own policy and future directions. Rather, as Mahon and McBride (2008) emphasise, nation-states still make policy, although ‘in the context of an increasingly dense web of transnational networks, operating at different scales’, and where ‘international organizations such as the OECD function as important nodes’ (Mahon and McBride 2008, 3; see also Mahon and McBride 2009).

It has been concluded that, although the OECD Convention does not include any reference to education (Papadopoulos 1994) it has even so, been able to set agendas that have been taken for granted in nation-states and govern national policy actors’ approach to educational reforms (Rubenson 2008, 242). It has been stated that especially OECD indicator studies,1 providing a member country with extensive information about the state and ranking of the its education system compared with those of other members, have become ever more powerful in creating competition between OECD member countries, thus influencing domestic education policies (Henry 2001; Kallo 2006; Rinne 2006; Rinne, Kallo, and Hokka 2004; Rubenson 2008; Schuller 2005). The policy recommendations aimed at the individual member countries by the OECD are often accepted at the national level in the hope of improving the educational performance (Noah 1998, 321, 323–4).

Several researchers have documented the OECD’s influence on domestic education policies (Eide 1990; Henry 2001; Kallo 2006; Niukko 2006a, 2006b; Rinne 2004, 2006, 2008; Rinne, Kallo, and Hokka 2004; Vickers 1994; Weymann and Martens 2005). Finnish researchers in particular, Professor Risto Rinne and his co-workers, have aimed at demonstrating the OECD’s strong impact on Finnish education policy. In their studies, the OECD’s influence is shown by analysing the problems, criticism and recommendations put forward in the OECD’s reviews and by contrasting them with the reforms actually realised in Finland (Rinne 2004, 2008; Rinne, Kallo, and Hokka 2004). Finnish researchers have also reported on Finnish state officials’ views on the role of the OECD in Finnish education (Kallo 2006; Niukko 2006a, 2006b; Rinne 2006). These studies contribute to our knowledge about the OECD’s possible influence on domestic education. However, by analysing the OECD’s knowledge production in the ways presented in the studies discussed above we, cannot probe the actual mechanisms through which the OECD recommendations transform into national education policies. In many cases, policy reforms carried out nationally may be due to other IGOs pursuing similar ideas or dependent on local pressures for educational changes (Alasuutari 2005; Armingeon 2004, 230–2). Secondly, the ideas originating from the OECD may have an influence on national reforms. However, as Djelic and Sahlin-Andersson (2006) have put it, the OECD’s ideas do not transfer to national policies as unaltered: ‘The travel of (transnational) ideas is an active process and ideas are shaped and translated differently in different settings. Carriers are active in structuring flows and patterns of diffusion but they are also translating ideas they mediate, reflecting in the process their own projects and interests’ (Djelic and Sahlin-Andersson 2006, 17; see also Mahon and McBride 2008).
From the perspective of national foreign policy, Finland’s entry into the OECD in 1969 was certainly a significant political step. In the post-war era it opened up free trade to the west. The entry also brought along an image of Finland as a highly industrialised western market economy. Today, along with Finland’s EU membership, the significance of the OECD is no longer so strong. Surely, the value added of the organisation may be Finland’s chance to co-operate and have a dialogue with countries outside the EU (FORMIN 2005, 5). In the same way, it can be assumed that the OECD offers expert knowledge and resources, of which it would otherwise be difficult for Finland to obtain (FORMIN 2001, 11). However, the aim of this article is not to deliberate the value of the OECD for Finland and the types of collaboration between the organisation and Finland, which has also been done by Professor Rinne and his colleagues (Kallo 2006; Niukko 2006a, 2006b; Rinne 2004, 2006, 2008; Rinne, Kallo, and Hokka 2004). Nor do we try to isolate the OECD’s true impact on national policy reforms, which is a very difficult if not impossible mission. Instead, we study Finland as a case in point in our attempt to shed light on the actual mechanisms by which the knowledge production of the OECD becomes integrated with the process in which national education policy takes its shape. This is done by analysing the uses of OECD knowledge production, and more specifically, the OECD PISA Study (Programme for International Student Assessment), by different political actors in Finland.

As emphasised earlier, policy paradigms spread at the international level and that international organisations play a significant role in the propagation of policy ideas (Béland 2005; Merrien 2001). However, when we open the lid of the black box of the ‘impact’ of international organisations on nation-states, we realise that domestic policy-makers, not the international organisations, are the primary actors whose activity determines whether, and in what form, international policy paradigms and recommendations influence policy at the national level. In the spirit of actor-network-theory (Latour 2005), the documents produced by organisations such as the OECD can certainly be considered as actors, but domestic policy-makers grant them their agentive capacity by referring to them. Especially due to the expert status of the OECD its reports are hard to ignore in public. Therefore, actors who want to get their voices heard and interests pursued in national education often use issues brought up in the OECD analyses to defend or criticise the decisions made or to be made in national education. Thus, the objective of our research is not to focus on the impacts of the OECD on Finnish education, but to analyse how the knowledge produced by the organisation is used in the national context when the decisions made or to be made are criticised or justified by different actors, and based on that analysis, what can be said about the role of the OECD in Finnish education policy formation. The policy to be adopted in an individual member country is never attributable to any single actor but is an end result of an intense network of social relations and material conditions, coupled with conflicting and converging definitions of the situation (Alasuutari 2005; Alasuutari and Rasimus 2009; Rautalin and Alasuutari 2007).

Thus, at the domestic level the actors involved occupy roles in the national administrative and political system: for instance political parties, employees’ unions, government officials and policy-makers. That does not mean, however, that individuals do not also have roles at the international level. For instance, government officials in the Ministry of Education certainly have international connections, links with the OECD and roles as Finland’s representatives in the organisation. Indeed, it is partly through these links and connections that global and national scales are intertwined. Yet it is important to note that in the national political decision-making process none
of the actors speak in the name of the OECD. Even when the views of the OECD are promoted, they are justified by national interests.

Assessing and comparing the students’ learning outcomes in and the educational systems of more than 40 countries, the OECD PISA Study enables a potentially powerful intervention in the field of education policy of a participating country. The case of Finland is particularly interesting because Finland has scored very high in all PISA assessments so far (OECD 2001, 2004, 2007). One would expect that such success is a blessing, allows the country in question to bask in glory and takes the pressure off demands for instant reforms. However, whether success is a blessing or a curse depends on what interest group one is talking about. Excellent results may be good for those who want to preserve the status quo but a challenge for those who want changes. The teachers’ profession, whose response to the PISA results we studied in an earlier article (Rautalin and Alasuutari 2007), is a good example. Before the publication of the first PISA results there was a lot of public discussion at the national level about teachers being very dissatisfied with the general appreciation of their profession and with their working conditions, which they argued were due to insufficient resources. Thus, their challenge was to interpret the PISA results in such a way that they would not confound the teachers’ political goals. Indeed, in the editorials of the Finnish teachers’ trade union magazine, Opettaja-lehti, Finland’s good PISA results were mainly explained by the expertise of Finnish teachers, and the low unit costs of education, in the PISA reports used as a measure of the efficiency of Finnish educational system, was interpreted as proof of lagging behind in investments in education. In that way, the teaching profession used the national PISA results to pass the buck to the national decision-makers on issues concerning development and to demand more resources for the Finnish education system.

In this article, we study the ways in which government officials working in the Ministry of Education and the National Board of Education in Finland (NBE) interpret the PISA results. In addition, we study public documents, such as the official national PISA reports and bulletins published by the Ministry or by the NBE. The idea is to investigate whether and in what ways the interpretations about PISA in these two data sets are biased by the standpoint of central government. The primary purpose of the Ministry of Education is to lay down the strategic guidelines and goals for education policy, whereas the NBE, an agency subordinate to the Ministry of Education, functions as a consultative institution and is responsible for the evaluation and development of education in Finland. Whether they work in the Ministry or in the NBE, since the government officials necessarily see education policy from the standpoint of state administration, it is interesting to see how they make use of the national PISA results when justifying their standpoints. The question is particularly interesting because in light of the PISA results there does not seem to be much to improve in Finnish comprehensive education. Thus, our research question is: how do Finnish central government officials interpret the PISA results so as to defend the decisions made in Finnish education policy in the past or to point out new areas of development concerning basic education?

The article at hand is organised as follows. First, we introduce the empirical data, methods and theories used in the study. Second, we discuss the three ways in which central government officials and the official reports by the state administration make use of the PISA results. Finally, in light of our analysis, we discuss what can be said about the role of the OECD in Finnish education policy and about the formation of international policy paradigms.
The data, method and theories

Status of empirical data

As noted earlier in the introduction, in Finland various interest groups are active in endeavouring to influence the decisions to be made in national education. It is also true that the voices of some actors gain more attention in the political discourse than the voices of others, thus having a stronger impact on national education. According to the Constitution of Finland, the highest formal decision-making power in educational matters rests with the Parliament of Finland and the Finnish government. In principle, the Parliament wields the supreme decision-making power in all issues concerning national education. Nevertheless, it is not always the case that all educational matters find their way to the Parliament. Numerous decisions concerning Finnish education are made in such a way that the Parliament cannot take a position on them. It can be stated that on some occasions Finnish central government officials play an even greater role than the Parliament in formulating the national education policy. Central government officials are responsible for the preparation and implementation of the main political decisions in Finland. They also have a crucial role in producing and disseminating new political thoughts and ideas. Officials are also consulted in the preparation of legislative proposals (Lampinen 1998, 162–3, 169). Hence, it can be argued that Finnish central government officials play a significant role in formulating Finnish education policy. Therefore, it is appropriate to study whether, and in what ways, the OECD PISA Study is integrated with the discourses within which central government officials and the official reports of the Ministry and NBE justify or criticise previous education policy and thus contribute to the agenda-setting for future reforms.

As the empirical data for this article, we use interviews conducted with officials working in the Ministry of Education and the National Board of Education (NBE) in Finland, bulletins published by these institutions and the official PISA reports. The official PISA reports (Kupari and Välijärvi 2005a; Välijärvi and Linnakylä 2002) used here as data are compiled by the researchers of the Institute for Educational Research, University of Jyväskylä. This institution was in charge of conducting PISA nationally in the two first rounds. However, since PISA in Finland is administered and financed by the Ministry of Education, these reports have been approved by the Ministry and thus can be considered as the Ministry’s official publications on PISA. The reason why we decided to interview central government officials was that there are not many official documents where Finland’s PISA results and the explanations for them are discussed by the Finnish state administration. In the interviews, we did not use any tightly structured skeleton of questions. If anything, we asked the officials to tell us about PISA, to estimate the reasons contributing to good national results and the value of the results for planning Finnish education. Of course, we could have asked the officials directly about how they use the PISA results in the national policy-making. Such questions are, however, problematic. The reliability of the information gained from informants is difficult to assess. For instance, even if assuming that interviewees speak honestly, instead of giving politically correct answers, it is not easy for individuals to assess how much they have been influenced by a particular factor (Alasuutari and Rasimus 2009).

This way, the focal point of this study is not how the OECD influences Finnish education policy, but rather how it is invoked when justifying the decisions made or to be made in Finnish education. If the officials refer to PISA when discussing the
Choosing officials working in the Ministry or the NBE for the interviews is significant in as much as the officials selected serve (or have served) either as actors who represent (or have represented) Finland in various OECD’s educational bodies and thus have (or have had) the mandate to introduce the OECD special projects agenda, in this case the PISA Study, to the policy-making agenda, or are (or have been) due to their assignment in central government, responsible for the development of Finnish comprehensive education and therefore use the PISA results to evaluate the status of Finnish basic education.10

To supplement the interview data, i.e. central government officials’ accounts of PISA, we also study PISA-related bulletins published by the Ministry of Education and by the NBE.11 Since the two more detailed national PISA reports published thus far, The skills for future: PISA 2000 in Finland and Finnish know-how on sustainable basis: PISA 2003 in Finland, are also official publications of the Ministry of Education, they are also included in the material analysed.

In the analysis section, we cite the bulletins and reports by giving their exact references. For reasons of confidentiality, the names and positions of the interviewees are, however, withheld in the transcribed interviews. Also, colloquial expressions have been replaced by more literary vocabulary in the interviews, but the actual subject matter of the interview data has been kept intact. The individual interview extracts cited in the text are coded with letters (LI meaning transcribed interview) and with numbers from one to five.

Theoretical and methodological framework

The theoretical starting point of this study is to scrutinise how reality is constructed in discursive practices, i.e. how various actors through their statements and accounts influence the ways in which we conceive of reality. To analyse this process in this article, we use a theoretical framework and methodological approach influenced by Michel Foucault’s notion of discourse and by Chaïm Perelman’s theory of rhetoric.

The discourse-analytical approach is significant for the study since it provides us with tools through which one can analyse how people in their language usage give meanings to different states of affairs, categorise the world and produce self-evident truths and how the discursive formations eventually, when accepted and turned into organisational forms, assume material forms as external conditions for people’s action (Foucault 1972; Potter 1996; Potter and Wetherell 1987; Wood and Kroger 2000). In the rhetorical analysis of texts, instead, one is interested in how people in their language usage actively aim at creating credibility, persuading others to accept certain arguments, thereby eliciting the desired actions (Perelman 1982; Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969).

As noted above, these two traditions are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they are complementary: when the rhetorical analysis of texts focuses on scrutinising how arguments are built in order to be effective and to evoke the desired action, the main purpose of the discourse analysis is to analyse how individual discourses gain acceptance in social practices and how, when materialised in organisational forms, they are likely to affect individuals’ conceptions of their environment, and thus every form of human action.
In this section, we do not go into depth in itemising the general starting points of the discourse analysis. The starting points of the Foucauldian approach were introduced in our earlier article (Rautalin and Alasuutari 2007). Instead, in the following, we briefly discuss the advantages of the rhetorical approach for this particular case study.

Rhetorical analysis can be applied in multiple ways to qualitative textual data. With rhetorical approach for instance, one can examine how individual arguments are constructed in order to appeal to specific audiences. By applying rhetorical approach one can also study different techniques the speaker (or writer) has exploited in order to build his or her argument credible and thus, effective.

In this article we do not, however, focus on analysing what kind of audience the speakers (or writers) in question aim at convincing. Nor do we analyse the techniques the speakers (or writers) have applied in order to build their arguments effective or aim to estimate the impacts the central government officials’ accounts will have on Finnish education. Rather, we are particularly interested in analysing how the government officials, when discussing the status of Finnish education, appeal to PISA when defending their position and political agenda, and on what premises their argumentation is built. In addition, we analyse documents, such as materials published by the Ministry of Education and the National Board of Education as well as the national PISA reports, which more or less directly reflect the views of the central administration. By revealing the underlying premises of the argumentation we believe that we are able to reveal the prevalent values of the speakers (or writers) but also of the Finnish society. Speakers (or writers) routinely appeal to premises that they assume are shared by the audience. Thus, the texts aimed at convincing a large audience, such as the whole nation, gravitate toward values that are most commonly shared (Perelman 1982, 21–32; see also Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969, 70–4). By focusing on revealing the central premises in the argumentation we also aim to make visible the types of justifications that are considered as so respectable or hard to resist that the potential opponents do not regard it as reasonable to raise intransigent resistance to the argumentation (Alasuutari and Rasimus 2009). By thus disclosing the tacit premises of the rhetoric, we aim to shed light on how and why PISA works as a tool in the national discourse on education policy.

By conducting case studies on the uses of the OECD PISA Study at the national level, we also aim to make a contribution to the wider theoretical discussion about the role of the IGOs in the formation of national policies (Alasuutari 2005; Alasuutari and Rasimus 2009; Rautalin and Alasuutari 2007). The starting point of our approach is the assumption that, along with other IGOs, the OECD through the knowledge it produces affects the ways in which political issues are perceived and handled at the national level. To capture the complex nature of the influence of the IGOs on a single nation state in our work, we apply the governmentality framework developed by Michel Foucault (Dean 1999; Foucault 1991; Rose 1999; Rose and Miller 1992). Conceiving of power in a broad sense, as a network of dominance entangled with knowledge and with the subject positions and identities of the actors involved (Alasuutari 1996, 18–22, 2004, 34–5, 69–70; Foucault 1980), the governmentality framework pays attention to the fact that modern governance works by influencing or guiding the comportment of others through acting upon their hopes, desires or milieu (Inda 2005). In this particular case, the idea is to analyse how different actors from their respective subject positions attempt to defend their initial interests by trying to impose their interpretations of the PISA reports, how that interpretive work transforms
the views and hopes of both themselves and other actors and how national education policy is the changing outcome of that process.

**PISA as a legitimate and important barometer**

Given that Finland has excelled in the PISA Study, it is hardly surprising that PISA was in no way questioned in Finnish central government officials’ talk, either in the written documents or in the officials’ interviews we conducted. On the contrary, PISA and its research reports were without exception accepted by officials, and PISA was advocated as a legitimate barometer producing reliable and comparable results.

In justifying the argument that PISA is a reliable barometer of the national educational systems, the central government officials’ texts particularly emphasise PISA’s scientific nature. In so doing, it is repeatedly contrasted with many earlier international studies, which are deemed political in nature. Thus, scientificity is used as a self-evident premise on which the argument of PISA’s reliability is built. The institution of science is invoked as a guarantee that the reports published are not compromised by what interested parties consider to be politically desirable research results. This is an interesting emphasis in light of the fact that the OECD is an inter-governmental organisation which was established with a clear political mission, i.e. to defend and promote market economy. Yet in its knowledge production, the OECD successfully promotes its scientific expertise and objectivity. In that sense, the OECD is a perfect example of a boundary organisation which facilitates political goals while protecting scientific ones (Bowker and Star 1999; Guston 2001).

The texts analysed also defend the claim that the PISA Study is of high scientific quality by pointing out that PISA has produced congruent results in all areas assessed so far (MINEDU 2006c). This argument is premised on the idea, common within the discourse of scientific research, that to be reliable, the same measurement technique or strategy must produce the same result on different occasions, for example when used by different researchers (Hammersley 2008). The citation above is an example of this argumentation.

The significance of PISA internationally, well it was very great, that is, it is believed and trusted, and one salient thing is that … that even if I was on the alert when this new, second PISA came, about what would happen to Finland’s results. … Not because the Finnish result must be … good, because the system only generates such results that it can, but to see whether the first report is congruent with the second. If it had happened that Finland dropped from that in the comparison, all the credibility in such international comparisons … would also have been lost for a long time, that is, … one of the most important things was … that this PISA comparison has shown that it is a competent comparison. … when two reports are in the same direction … it is a very important observation here. (LI 3)

In the quotation above, the official bases his argument that PISA can be considered a reliable barometer internationally on the consistence of the results between the first and second rounds of the study. Based on scientific concepts, the argument that the PISA Study is of high quality sounds convincing, at least for those who do not bear in mind that reliable results in the sense defined above are not necessarily valid; consistent measurements may well include a systematic error and measure something entirely different from what they are assumed to measure.

While emphasising that PISA is a scientific programme, the central government officials also stress that PISA is highly useful for the development of Finnish
education. The main grounds used both in the national PISA reports and in the interviews conducted in advocating PISA’s usefulness is that in PISA a wide range of countries is assessed, and that as an inter-governmental project it differs from earlier projects, the results of which have mostly remained among the research institutes.

On those grounds it is argued that, through PISA, Finland is able to assess the quality of its comprehensive education, especially the felicity of the reforms conducted nationally and possible new points of development. The following two excerpts from the national PISA report are examples of the argumentation of PISA’s importance for Finland.

The PISA programme is essentially a scientific research programme, but it also has strong practical objectives. The aim of PISA is to generate knowledge which supports the further development of education and teaching and helps decision-making in education policy. (Välijärvi 2002, 2)

PISA affords an international framework and set of criteria in which the outcomes of the Finnish comprehensive school system can be assessed. International comparison brings to the fore factors in which Finnish education is strong, but it also indicates the areas in need of further development, studying skills, pupil groups, schools etc. International evaluation provides perspectives and interpretative depth to our national image of comprehensive school and helps us to see those sore points which we in our own country should address. These observations can also be used in the targeting of national evaluations. (Välijärvi 2002, 4–5)

This argumentation is grounded on the competition and mutual emulation of policies between nation-states. Thus, if student outcomes are above the average of other countries that belong to the same reference group, it is self-evidently considered as evidence of the quality of the educational system, and thus possibly provide other countries with ideas for policy reforms. From those tacit premises it is easy for the government officials to draw the conclusion that since PISA gives countries ‘benchmarks and regular updates on how students perform against them’ (Välijärvi et al. 2007, i), it is useful as a tool which helps to develop the educational system.

**Successful national educational reforms**

Apart from arguing that the PISA research programme is both scientifically sound and practically useful, throughout their accounts the central government officials emphasise that educational reforms conducted and decisions taken nationally have led to good national PISA results. In this instance, the officials refer to certain laws and educational reforms that have been passed in recent years. The texts mention the comprehensive school reform (public free comprehensive school), university-level education of Finnish teachers, autonomy given to Finnish teachers and decentralisation of the decision-making power in education. In addition, a number of features of the Finnish educational system are listed, including statutory remedial and special education provided for weaker students, a well-resourced and completely free basic education, including teaching, learning materials, school meals, health care, dental care and school transport, and that each schoolchild in Finland can go to the nearest school irrespective of sex, economic situation or linguistic and cultural background. Furthermore, government officials list efficient research and development activities in education including curriculum development and intense co-operation between educational authorities, the municipal sector and the teachers’ associations.
In discussing the success achieved in PISA, officials typically argue that the good student outcomes result from the work of the central government – an argument that acquires credibility from the fact that the Finnish educational system has in the post-war era been quite centrally organised (Antikainen 2005; Lampinen 1998). It was only in the 1990s when the municipalities in Finland received shared decision-making power on issues concerning education. The following report extract illustrates this argumentation.

The relative equality of opportunity in studying is evinced by the fact that differences between schools in Finland were among the smallest of the OECD member countries. … In Finland the regional variation was slight. The skills in north, south, east and west were very similar. There was some discrepancy in favour of urban areas between the achievements of urban and rural boys. The majority of these discrepancies can be explained by differences in the pupils’ socio-economic backgrounds, which in the rural areas are lower than in urban schools. (Välijärvi et al. 2002, 196)

In the extract, good and homogenous learning performances achieved by Finnish students are linked to the equal learning opportunities of Finnish pupils, and thus the government officials implicitly take the credit. However, regarding differences in learning outcomes between boys living in the cities and those living in the rural areas, they are explained by socio-economic backgrounds. In that way the reason for shortcomings is constructed as being due to factors beyond the means of education policy.

The role played by the teachers, whose contribution in achieving excellent learning outcomes is acknowledged, is discussed in a similar vein. Instead of constructing them as agents in the process, they are treated as products of excellent teacher education. The following interview quotation is an example of this argumentation.

The fact of our university-level teachers, that is that it is a university degree, a master’s degree, that serves to ensure … that we have a chance … to produce high-quality teaching. New teachers are equipped with very good competences when they embark on work in schools, to do that work, and again the high educational level … creates … trust and then on the other hand, so if we think about what is done in school, the relatively large power of decision in implementing the teaching, that is, that we don’t have this culture of inspection, we don’t believe in it, rather that … one gives opportunities …. (LI 2)

In the quotation above the good quality of Finnish comprehensive education is linked to the Finnish teachers’ university training. In addition, the Ministry’s decision to dismantle the centralised inspection system is given part of the credit. In that way, in this context, too, the credit of the success is given to the central government.

**Actions required from other actors**

According to the central government officials interviewed, the PISA Study shows that the standard of Finnish basic education is good, if not excellent. However, both in the interviews and in the written documents representing the voice of the state administration it was pointed out that there are still deficiencies in national learning outcomes and these should be quickly remedied. However, similarly to the argumentation analysed in previous sections, here, too, the deficiencies are constructed as resulting from elsewhere than the work of the Finnish educational authorities. One of the targets of criticism is Finnish pedagogics and thus Finnish teachers. In the national PISA reports this kind of argumentation is especially prevalent:
In addition to a high standard overall, the learning outcomes of young Finns were particularly even. ... In Finland, on the other hand, the best pupils did not reach the standard one might have expected given the high average level. In mathematics the most successful 5 per cent of young Finns were placed eighth, in literacy and natural sciences third and in problem-solving sixth. As a whole the findings clearly reveal the equality of opportunity in Finnish comprehensive education. At the same time, however, it challenges us to consider pedagogical solutions by which the most gifted students could be encouraged to give of their best in mathematics and on their own initiative to improve their achievements in school and outside it. (Kupari and Välijärvi 2005b, 228)

In the report extract above, the fact that the excellent outcomes achieved in PISA are due to a homogeneity of the students’ outcomes with only a few top performers, is constructed as a problem, as a challenge to the school system to better serve gifted students in particular. The challenge is aimed at teachers, who should create better pedagogical solutions. This argumentation again rests on the premise that ranking above or below in terms of a particular barometer in international comparison can be read as an indicator of the quality of an activity considered as responsible for the score. Although the Finnish results in the PISA Study were excellent and considered as indicating that the educational system is good, in this instance a single score, the number of top performers below the international average, is used in evincing the argument that teachers should pay more attention to talented students. There is no discussion on whether it would be possible to aim at increasing the number of top performers and still retain the high average learning outcome. This argumentation rests on the tacit premise that scores in an area or student sub-population are unrelated to other areas, and that a country can adopt the pedagogical solutions as ‘best practices’ from countries that have ranked above the average in one area without affecting the whole.

The discussion of the small amount of homework given to Finnish students and the minor processing of the homework at school is a concrete example of such an argumentation. An extract from a Finnish PISA report quoted below illustrates this.

Another clear difference between Finns and the OECD member countries on average concerned the feedback pupils receive from their schools. In PISA this was ascertained through practices related to homework and how it was processed. In contrast to most countries, Finnish teachers made little use of homework for purposes of pedagogical guidance and giving feedback. Moreover, teacher feedback was more generally directed to lower achievers, which might indicate that homework and feedback on it are used rather to check pupils’ work than to encourage them to study more outside teaching. (Välijärvi et al. 2002, 199)

The argumentation in the quotation above is again premised on the assumption that teachers could adopt some practices from other countries without affecting Finnish schoolwork practices as a whole. In this case it is suggested that teachers should increase the use of homework as a tool of pedagogical guidance and giving feedback to pupils, because in this score Finland is below the average. This recommendation stems from the argumentation that by giving students more homework and using it for feedback, teachers could encourage talented students rather than using homework as a control mechanism aimed at low achievers. In this instance, too, there is no discussion whether such a change in practice would affect the average learning outcomes.

In the interviews and written documents, the Finnish municipalities are also held responsible for some of the results that were deemed inadequate. The extract below from an interview illustrates this.
The problem just now is that teachers are municipal employees ... and it is the employer’s duty to arrange further training and now as we know, hardly any of the municipalities do so, they have no money, there are no opportunities, the teachers are not granted leave of absence and so on. All sorts of obstacles and it (the problem) has been encountered in such a way that central government has begun to take care of this finance, although it is not really for central government to do ... the reason being that much would otherwise not be taken care of ... especially now that there are these new curricula ... both in basic teaching and in upper secondary school, and training for that needs to be arranged. We have money for it in the budget, the National Board of Education is running it, buying from the universities and wherever, putting it out to competitive bidding and ... arranging continuing education for teachers. ... We would never have got this business with knowledge industry or the information society through in the schools unless central government had paid for the teachers’ continuing education. ... So that whenever there is something like now the bases for the new curricula, then you have to look ... that how the teachers will acquire the skills to put them into practice. (LI5)

In this instance, the central government officials, who are employed by the state, put the blame for the insufficient in-service-training of the teachers on the municipalities. This argument is supported by appealing to the law, according to which municipalities are responsible for it. By emphasising how the state has been forced to organise the training on the municipalities’ behalf, the government official constructs the central government as the hero. Instead, the interviewee does not take up the possibility that the state could allocate more money for education.

When the state resources invested in education are taken up in the interviews, the possibility that the state could increase its spending on basic education is denounced by appealing to the PISA results.

They say that an enlightened compromise could be that Finland appears to be managing so well on present resources that if we increase the resources, well it can’t be a general resource increase, but it would have to be channelled in such a way that we could be sure it would have an effect. ... That’s how it should be done. ... In this particular situation you can say that raising the unit costs in basic education after the PISA results would not be a reasonable Finnish policy objective. ... Instead we could think about those 10% of boys who don’t do well, you might wonder what about these certain pockets in Lapland and the sparsely populated areas ... and then you might ask where do we have problems in which we could invest and they are for example continuing education for teachers. ... An enlightened politician ... shouldn’t get involved in how ... the miserable resources of the comprehensive school system should be fixed and now we should bring down the sizes of groups and get the standard up because we can be quite content with the level we have and the distribution of it. What we have internationally ... but ... we could rather look for aspects when the investment is made. (LI 4)

Here again, the international comparative data provided by the PISA programme are used to support the central government officials’ argument, according to which there is no need for more money to be spent on basic education. The fact that, despite internationally low unit costs, Finnish students do very well in learning outcomes compared with other countries, is used as evidence that the Finnish educational system is well-resourced and that an overall increase in resources would only be a waste of money. As a corollary it is argued that any extra resources must be allocated to areas with deficiencies to see the true effects of resource augmentation.

Discussion

In this article we set out to analyse how government officials working in the Finnish Ministry of Education and National Board of Education, when discussing the status of
Finnish education, appeal to PISA when justifying their views on education policy. In a similar vein, we have analysed documents such as the national PISA reports, which represent the official government views. The analysis has shown that the interpretations of the PISA results brought forward in these materials indeed tend to favour those responsible for actions within the central government. In the texts analysed, the scientificity of the PISA programme is presented as beyond doubt, while the direct usefulness of the research results for the further development of national education is also proclaimed. As to the specific results of PISA, the excellent learning outcomes of the Finnish students are argued to be due to the educational reforms conducted and decisions made by the central government, whereas shortcomings and areas in which central government sees a need for improvement are argued to be attributable to the actions of other agents. It is typical of the interpretations of the national PISA results evinced by the central government that cross-national comparisons are used in flexible ways. Finland’s high overall ranking is used as evidence of the high quality of the educational system. Yet a single score, for instance the number of top performers below the international average, may be used to demand reforms, for instance the adoption of new pedagogical solutions, without reflecting on the ways in which changes in parts would affect the whole. Thus, because it is implicitly assumed that single scores are unrelated to other areas, with the authority of PISA, teachers are recommended to adopt solutions as ‘best practices’ from countries that have ranked above the average in a particular area.

Thus, the analysis shows that the conclusions drawn from the PISA results in texts representing the views of the central government are biased and serve to justify its policy agenda. We do not, however, imply thereby that we as researchers know what unbiased and truthful conclusions can be drawn regarding the PISA results. Instead, we want to stress that on the basis of research results, drawing conclusions about what factors produced the scores or what reforms should be undertaken, is not based on formal logic. Such argumentation may be more or less convincing in the eyes and ears of the audience, but nonetheless it belongs in the realm of rhetoric, and therefore in the realm of politics.

We have hopefully evinced a convincing argument according to which the interpretations of Finnish central government and its officials systematically defend its own position and its policy goals. Thus, one can say that the PISA results are used by the Ministry to justify its recommendations regarding future reforms. That is of course precisely why organisations such as nation-states fund empirical social research: to obtain information that helps policy-making. The study of Vickers (1994) which analysed the role of the OECD in Australian policy-making, suggests that knowledge produced by the organisation has had at least two key functions in national policy-making: to offer national decision-makers new ways to conceptualise national problems, and to legitimate an already chosen policy direction. The analysis of the empirical data used in this particular case study showed that the OECD PISA Study clearly had the last-mentioned function: to offer Finnish central government officials scientific evidence that the political decisions made so far have been of the right sort. Since in this case policy goals are grounded in and justified by the empirical evidence of a scientific study, one could talk about evidence-based policy. However, our analysis supports the point, made also by earlier research, that policy cannot really be evidence-based, at best it may be evidence-informed (Black 2001; Hughes 2007; May 2006; Mykhalovskiy and Weir 2004; Naughton 2005).
Although our analysis shows that national policy-makers, in this case officials of the Ministry of Education and National Board of Education, use the OECD’s PISA project to justify their policy goals, this study also sheds light on the way in which global governance and international regimes have a bearing at the national level. In the case of PISA it could be argued that Finnish basic education serves as a model for other OECD countries, and is in that way little affected by the PISA project. Yet, or precisely because of the considerable attention and publicity that PISA has received, policy-makers or other actors who want to take part in the education policy discussion cannot do so without referring to the PISA results and interpretations of them. In that sense, the key concepts, objects of measurement and measurement techniques adopted in PISA are integrated as part of the Finnish education policy discourse. This means that, among other countries taking part in PISA, Finland is part of an epistemic community within which education policy and its aims and methods are discussed using the same concepts and scores.

The discussion about the relatively small number of top performers is a good example of how global trends may be introduced even when the present system is deemed internationally competitive. Although the secret behind Finland’s success, homogeneity of good learning outcomes across the student population, is well-acknowledged, the Finnish central government officials suggest that teachers should set students more homework and use it as a means to pay more attention to talented students. In that recommendation, one can identify the global hype about the importance of innovation and creativity for nation-states, and the idea to make basic education, too, serve that purpose.

Notes

1. The OECD’s knowledge production in education divides roughly in four main categories: synthesised formulations of central policy issues, policy examinations of individual countries or groups of countries (so-called country reviews), yearly publications of statistics and indicators, and ever increasingly also thematic reviews focusing on a specific form of education or educational issue (Rubenson 2008).
2. In the study by Kallo (2006), the impacts are analysed from two different perspectives: first, how the OECD may affect national education policies and second, how individual member countries may contribute to the education policy of the OECD.
3. For Finland’s entry to the OECD in 1969 see historical reviews by Karjalainen and Tarkka (1989) and Seppinen (1997).
4. The PISA Study is an OECD-led international comparative learning assessment measuring 15-year-old students’ knowledge and skills in reading, mathematical and scientific literacy. For further information about the study see the OECD PISA home page at http://www.pisa.oecd.org/pages/0,2987,en_32252351_32235731_1_1_1_1_1,00.html.
5. The number of participating countries has varied during PISA’s history. There were 43 participants in 2000, 41 in 2003, 57 in 2006, and there will be 67 participating countries in 2009, the next study (PISA 2008).
6. In all PISA assessments conducted thus far Finland has scored very high in each area evaluated. For more detailed results of Finland see the Finnish PISA website maintained by the University of Helsinki at http://www.pisa2006.helsinki.fi/finland_pisa/results/2006/2006.htm.
7. For the duties and sphere of authority of the Ministry of Education in Finland see the Ministry’s website at http://www.minedu.fi/OPM/Ministerioe_ja_hallinnonala/?lang=en
9. In Finland there are lot of educational development work and reforms which do not receive the form of legislation (Lampinen 1998, 163).
10. The interview request was sent altogether to seven government officials in the central government. One of them declined to give an interview and another forwarded the request to another colleague already selected for interview. The five expert interviews conducted for the study were conducted in the time period of June–September in 2005, during the period the results of the second round of the PISA Study were already public.

11. Bulletins were collected in autumn 2006.


14. LI 3, LI 4, LI 5.


17. (MINEDU 2006a; Välijärvi et al. 2002, 200) LI 1, LI 3, LI 4, LI 5.

18. (Kupari and Välijärvi 2005b, 230; NBE 2006) LI 1, LI 2, LI 3, LI 5.


24. (Kupari and Välijärvi 2005b, 226) LI 5.

25. (MINEDU 2006a; NBE 2006) LI 1, LI 3.

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Chapter 6. The role of PISA publicity in forming national education policy: The case of the Finnish curriculum reform

*Marjaana Rautalin*

**Introduction**

In recent years, Finland has done outstandingly well in the international PISA assessment (Programme for International Student Assessment). In the study led by OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) that assesses how far students near the end of compulsory education have acquired some of the knowledge and skills essential for full participation in society, Finland has been consistently at or near the top of all nations tested and in all areas assessed so far (OECD, 2001, 2004, 2007, 2010).¹ In the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, Finland’s success in PISA has been explained mainly by the successful national education policy, for instance the autonomy given to the local level. In a Ministry bulletin from 2006, the background to Finland’s PISA success is discussed in the following way:

The education system is flexible and the administration is strongly based on delegation and support. Centralised steering is conducted through the aims set by laws and degrees as well as by the national core curriculum. Municipalities are responsible for the organization of education and the implementation of the aims.
Schools and teachers have a lot of independent autonomy in the provision and contents of education.

(MINEDU, 2006)

Yet, soon after the release of the first PISA result, a curriculum reform was introduced by the central administration that excessively curtailed the autonomy of Finnish schools and teachers. Where the earlier national framework curriculum of 1994 (NBE, 1994) was perhaps the lightest in the world, enabling Finnish municipalities and, ultimately, individual schools to set their own curricula on the basis of the national core curriculum, the framework curriculum introduced in 2004 (NBE, 2004) was much more detailed and binding. The new curriculum set educational objectives not just for the whole nine years of basic education, which was the case in the earlier framework curriculum, but also, for instance, for the second, grade and ninth grades. The cut points (grading) for objectives in different subjects were also chosen differently.

In the Finnish central administration, the introduction of the new framework curriculum has been justified particularly by the fact-finding work the Finnish National Board of Education (NBE) had conducted in the late 1990s and the results of which had indicated that the previous reform, i.e. the curriculum of 1994, was moving in the right direction but did not meet the requirements of the new millennium. That is to say, in the NBE it was believed that although Finland had achieved good results in PISA just at the time when basic education was nationally governed by very liberal curricular guidelines (Laukkanen, 2008), the new detailed framework curricula would meet the challenges emerging in Finnish future education even better (Lindström, 2005, p. 33).
In this study I examine how it was possible in Finland to carry through a curriculum reform that strongly conflicted with how national educational experts have interpreted the reasons for Finland’s PISA success. I will gloss the paradox by examining the national PISA publicity, particularly the ways in which PISA has been discussed and thus constructed in the Finnish media. I will also examine how this publicity about PISA affected the publicity surrounding the national curriculum reform and, hence, the decisions made concerning that reform. I argue that the role of the national media is crucial in the process of forming national policies. In their reporting of global news events, the national media put forward interpretations of these events, thereby constructing of them a meaningful and comprehensible public story. Some of these stories or discourses can achieve dominance that further determine how other (related) issues can be discussed in the national public. This way, the national media serve as a forum by which foreign news events are introduced into domestic settings (Clausen, 2004; Gans, 1979; Liebes, 1992; Nossek, 2004) and through which they become incorporated in the national public discourse, thus affecting people’s perceptions of society as well as of desirable policy solutions (e.g. Alasuutari, Qadir, & Creutz, forthcoming; Qadir & Alasuutari, 2013).

This case links to recent discussions about how national public PISA debates allegedly affect domestic education policies. For instance, Takayama (2008, and Chapter 8 in this volume) has studied how the Japanese media has covered PISA and argues that biased media writing on PISA enabled the Japanese Ministry of Education to halt an unpopular curriculum reform known as yutori. According to Takayama (2008, p. 401), the
misleading media coverage "not only enabled its (the Ministry’s) reorientation of the unpopular yutori reform but facilitated its institutional shift to the market-based output-management mode of educational administration.” Similarly, German researchers have examined national public debates on PISA and the ways in which these have affected German education policy. For instance, Martens and Niemann (2010) show that PISA results led to an intense public outcry in Germany. According to them, the PISA finding that the socio-economic background of teenagers in Germany seems to have more effect on national learning performances than on average in OECD countries, was picked up by the national public to demand reforms. As a result, the political elite in Germany has been forced to take measures to improve the country’s standing in future comparisons (see also Ertl, 2006; Gruber, 2006; Niemann, 2010).

However, existing studies approach the influence of public PISA debates mainly from the perspective of how poor PISA results affect national policies. For instance, Martens and Niemann (2010, p. 5) argue that performing well in PISA does not seem to entail the need for further analysis or discussion in the domestic sphere. Instead, the claim is that poor results seem to prophesy reforms, but only if the country’s poor performance is framed as crucial in the domestic public and if there is a gap between the country’s self-perception and the empirical results evinced by PISA (Dobbins & Martens, 2010; Martens & Niemann, 2010, p. 2). Furthermore, the existing studies do not address the question of how the ways in which PISA is framed in the national media also affects the ways in which other issues regarding national education can be discussed in the domestic public and hence, the decisions to be made concerning these issues.
Finally, these and many other studies on the local uses of PISA (e.g. Dobbins & Martens, 2012; Grek, Lawn, & Ozga, 2009; Takayama, 2010), assume that the comparison, after being accepted locally, harmonizes national education policies. This idea of PISA affecting national policies is based on the notion that the OECD is a very (or even the most) influential actor in shaping national policies. By contrast, I argue here that the active and creative role of local actors is central to national policy formation. Local actors do not solely implement ready-made global policy ideas but instead draw on them in the local political field in line with their interests. The final policy outcome depends on these local developments, in which all kinds of counter discourses are mobilized to negotiate the shape of policy reforms. Consequently, as emphasized by Alasuutari (2011) and discussed in the introduction to this volume, the end result may be a far cry from the original ideals (as promoted by the OECD) and there may be considerable differences between countries in which the same policy idea or model has been introduced.

In this study, I focus on how good results in an international comparison can affect national policies. I explore how the ways in which the Finnish media frame Finland’s PISA results also affects the framing of other (related) issues in the domestic public and, consequently, informs new policies and practices. In this, I also wish to contribute to the theoretical discussion of how the positive publicity of events, such as of cross-national comparisons, can have an effect on the processes in which national policies are formed. In this context, I draw on Ari Adut’s theory of the public sphere (Adut, 2012), and discuss how PISA publicity has made it possible for Finnish politicians and decision-
makers to continue reforming despite the publicly evinced explanations for the national PISA success.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. First, I briefly introduce the data and methods used in the empirical analysis. Next, I present the main results of the analysis, i.e. how PISA was discussed and constructed in the Finnish media and then how the national curriculum reform was discussed in the same media. I am particularly interested in the different ways in which the reform was attacked by Finnish actors during the time period analyzed. I then discuss how the interpretations of PISA in the Finnish media may have influenced interpretations of the national curriculum reform in the same forum, and how Finnish education policy can be seen as an outcome of that process. By way of conclusion, I consider the overall role of international comparisons such as PISA in forming domestic policies.

Data and methods

The empirical data here consists of stories with reference to PISA and stories with reference to the curriculum for Finnish basic education appearing in *Helsingin Sanomat*, *Suomen Tietotoimisto*, and *Suomen Kuvalehti*. Both news stories and letters to the editor are included. The texts cover the time period January 2001–April 2009.

*Helsingin Sanomat*, *Suomen Tietotoimisto*, and *Suomen Kuvalehti* are all prestigious national media with large circulations. *Helsingin Sanomat* is the biggest quality daily newspaper in Finland with more than 380,000 readers daily. *Suomen Tietotoimisto* is the leading national press agency in Finland, providing news services to nearly all media
houses in the country besides having international clients. The total circulation of media that published news provided by *Suomen Tietotoimisto* in 2011 was more than 2.5 million. Finally, *Suomen Kuvalehti* is one of the most respected and followed weekly periodicals in Finland, with around 320,000 readers a week. All three publications cite freedom of speech and independent communication as operating principles. They all require that the news they publish be based on verified information and be impartial (*Suomen Kuvalehti*, 2011; *Suomen Tietotoimisto*, 2011; WSOY, 2011) and, taken together, they offer a comprehensive picture of PISA and curriculum reform publicity.

In the analysis I make no distinction between arguments in “traditional” news stories and those in letters to the editor. Rather, I see all arguments put forward when discussing PISA and the curriculum reform as reflections of how these events are discussed by the national audience. That is to say, if a viewpoint is not highlighted by journalists in the news stories, it is typically raised by readers in letters to the editor.

I analyze media texts discussing the curriculum reform over about eight years instead of only from the time when the reform was introduced, since I want to examine how the national public reform discussion evolved. There are cases in which political decisions do not become public issues immediately but only with a delay and in the context of some other (related) issue (*Gans*, 1979). Thus, I want to ensure that I also include any stories in which the reform becomes a subject of critical scrutiny even later, for instance when possibly discovering some misfit between the main objectives of the reform and national success factors for PISA.
The data was collected using the media’s own electronic archives. In collecting the data I ensured that all stories discussing both the PISA study and the curriculum for Finnish basic education were included (not just the “reform” since otherwise I might have missed numerous stories where the reform was discussed but not referred to as such). By collecting all stories with references to PISA and the curriculum, I eventually had two separate text corpora; one consisting of stories with references to the PISA Study, and the other with references to the curriculum for Finnish basic education. In my final analysis, however, I focus on examining how PISA and the actual reform were discussed in the Finnish media.

I analyzed the data by identifying inductively the different types of contexts or frames in which PISA or the curriculum occurred. The frames present in the media texts are ideal objects of the study as these organize the world both for news workers who report on the events (Scheufele, 2006) but more importantly, for readers who aim to make sense of the events reported (Entman, 1989; Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, & Sasson, 1992; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Iyengar, 1991; Tuchman, 1978). Having inductively identified different frames within which PISA and the curriculum appeared in the collected stories, I had an all-embracing typology to which all stories referring to PISA and the curriculum could be assigned. After that, I coded the stories of each corpus according to this typology using systematic random sampling. The different types of typologies were not mutually exclusive. Rather, by coding each story I marked all the contexts in which PISA or the curriculum was referred to. This way, one story could be coded to several, parallel typologies.
This method relates to approaches broadly known as rhetorical analysis (Perelman, 1982; Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969) and discourse analysis (Foucault, 1972; Potter, 1996; Wood & Kroger, 2000). In my empirical analysis, I pay special attention to the types of justifications or \textit{premises} used in the various arguments evinced by various audience members that are perceived to be so convincing that they are taken up and reported by the media. This becomes important as I seek to find how the dominant interpretations made of PISA and the national curriculum reform turn into organizational forms, thus shaping Finnish education policy (Rautalin & Alasuutari, 2007, 2009).

\section*{The superiority of Finnish basic education}

Considering how PISA was discussed both in the news stories and letters to the editor, my analysis shows that PISA appears in nine distinct frames in the Finnish media. Mostly, however, PISA emerges in the frames "Finnish education the best in the world" and "all is not well in Finland". The overwhelming majority of stories discuss PISA in one or both of these frames. The former occurs in more than 94\% of all the sample stories with references to the PISA Study. One prominent way of coming to terms with PISA in this context is to highlight how Finland and its education system, due to PISA, attract countries worldwide, and how international experts visit to learn about the Finnish education system:

The PISA comparisons conducted by the OECD on what fifteen-year-olds can do have caused thousands of experts to come to Finland to witness, for example, special teaching, teacher training and in general how schools are run…Even
before 2001, when the results of the first PISA survey on literacy were published, Finland was a fairly popular destination for educationists, but thereafter the number has increased many times over…Since 2004 some 1,200 visitors from some 60 countries have come annually to Finland through the Ministry of Education and Culture. Last year there were some 1,800.

*(Helsingin Sanomat*, domestic news 24 February 2008)

Discussions about the potential reasons contributing to Finland’s PISA success are often highlighted in the media. Some of these are reported to be the successful Finnish education policy, the successful work done at the local level (the role of Finnish teachers is especially emphasized), as well as the many factors outside the education sector, such as a strong national culture of reading newspapers. One factor that is particularly underlined in the media as being part of the successful Finnish education policy is the autonomy given to Finnish teachers. An argument put forth in this context is that we had achieved good learning outcomes due to the trust Finnish teachers enjoy:

The confidence in teachers is great. In Finland teachers deservedly enjoy a great deal of power, responsibility and freedom. There is no need for a cumbersome inspectorate. In many countries inspections and constant testing stifle teachers’ creativity and misdirect energy.

In Finland teachers plan their teaching from the curriculum level right up to the individual lessons. Here they are capable of it. In Finland subject teachers take the same studies in those subjects as other degree students. Thus the teachers’
networks include people active in the world of science and scientific achievements seep through unofficial channels to school.

(Helsingin Sanomat, opinion page 2 December 2007)

In this text, the writer links the autonomy given to Finnish teachers with the trust Finnish teachers enjoy. However, instead of attributing the trust and autonomy Finnish teachers enjoy to the work done by the teachers, the writer attributes them to the high quality national teachers’ training organized by the state. Hence the text constructs Finnish decision-makers, particularly the Finnish education policy, as a hero rather than Finnish teachers who, at least according to their own interpretations (Rautalin & Alasuutari, 2007), have done self-sacrificing work despite scarce resources for basic education.

Besides discussing the superiority of Finnish basic education, the media also reports potential deficiencies in basic education. The frame “all is not well in Finland” occurs in about 67% of the sample stories mentioning PISA. In these stories, the media reports different actors’ interpretations of potential deficiencies in Finnish education despite the PISA success. However, the deficiencies claimed vary greatly, and do not constitute any uniform ”grand design” for how Finnish basic education should be developed. One concern highlighted in this context is that by neglecting issues potentially endangering basic education, Finland will lose its leading position in international learning assessments;
“School closures, bigger groups in teaching and mergers of upper secondary schools planned in many municipalities are causing many teachers to ask themselves if they have strength enough,” says Professor Eira Korpinen of the Teacher Education Department of the University of Jyväskylä.

“Teachers, school heads and pupils need humane and encouraging conditions when they recommence their work this autumn”, she says.

Professor Korpinen points out that although the international PISA study on school achievement showed that our country’s comprehensive school pupils’ skills are top class in reading and mathematics, things look quite different for future surveys. If special teaching and extra coaching are neglected, as is now the case, international studies will not be so complimentary to us Finns.

(Suomen Tietotoimisto – Finnish News Agency, domestic news 13 August 2002)

Here, a professor in a Finnish teacher training college makes a distinction between good national learning performance and existing political practices. By highlighting Finnish teenagers’ high learning outcomes in reading and mathematics on one hand, and the retrenchments to be made in schools and teaching on the other, the professor implies that Finnish decision-makers are hindering rather than assisting schools and teachers from producing good learning performances in the future. This way, the professor raises Finland’s future ranking in PISA as a political asset to call for more resources for national education.
Other frames appear notably more seldom in the stories discussing PISA. On the whole, the analysis reveals that PISA is covered in a very positive manner. PISA results are particularly used to argue how the Finnish education system is superior to others, although the media also highlights potential deficiencies. However, again, the critical views are highly fragmentary in nature. If anything, Finland’s PISA ranking is used to argue how education is in good shape in Finland, how the Finnish education system is internationally acknowledged, and that any shortcomings should be remedied in order to do well in future assessments.

The moderate national curriculum discussion

In covering PISA there is hardly any mention of the curriculum reform in the media, let alone its seemingly inconsistent nature. In none of the stories discussing PISA is the argument evinced that Finnish teachers and schools have too much autonomy. Against this background, it is interesting that a curriculum reform was implemented that goes against how national educational experts, and the national media, explain Finland’s PISA success. In order to understand how such a contradictory reform could be introduced, I argue one needs to study the publicity emerging on that reform, i.e. how the reform was constructed in the Finnish public and how this publicity together with other publicities enabled its introduction.

The issue of the Finnish basic education curriculum is very much present in the national public and is covered in diverse contexts. Interestingly, the actual curriculum reform is discussed relatively little. The reform appears in only about one third of the sample stories where curricula are mentioned. Although the reform itself is discussed in diverse
contexts, it mostly appears within the frame of being seen as advantageous - potentially enhancing equality in Finnish basic education - or in negative terms - as a threat or burden for Finnish teachers and pupils. Each frame occurs in about 40% of the sample stories with references to the curriculum. I am particularly interested in whether the national curriculum reform, especially its seemingly inconsistent nature, was publicly contested in Finland both at the time of preparing the reform and thereafter. Therefore, I concentrate here particularly on the latter frame, i.e. how the menace of the reform is validated in the Finnish public during this period, and how PISA is used as a weapon when attacking the reform.

Amazingly, the argument that the reform runs contrary to how Finnish educational experts parade Finland’s high PISA ranking, is not made in any story. That is, neither the news stories nor letters to the editor ever raise the argument that Finnish education policy decisions contradict how Finland’s PISA success is explained by national educational authorities. Instead of being seen as politically incorrect or disharmonious, the reform is interpreted as having other faults. One very prominent point presented in this context is that the proposed reform increases compulsory subjects at the expense of electives:

The editorial addressed the new proposal for the allocation of hours in comprehensive school…Attention was paid to the main feature of the proposal, reduction of elective subjects in favour of subjects compulsory for all. Arts subjects, pictorial art and music are an important group of elective subjects. These subjects are being removed from the upper classes of comprehensive
school as consequences of the reduction in elective subjects…Doing away with artistic subjects in the upper classes of comprehensive school is to do away not only with the joy of creation and expression, but also to dumb down the level of national cultivation. Are Finnish society and cultural life conceivable without a high level of musical and artistic life, without Finnish design, film and architecture? Not everyone becomes a professional in these subjects, but everyone does indeed need the ability to comprehend and enjoy culture and the products of the arts.

(Helsingin Sanomat opinion page 16 May 2001)

In this extract, a music teacher and an art teacher attack the new proposal for distribution of hours in Finnish comprehensive schools by linking the elective subjects, particularly the arts subjects, to the level of national cultivation. By highlighting the areas in artistic life in which Finns have achieved merit nationally and internationally, the argument is that the very arts subject that the new curriculum proposes to reduce, are the ones that can ensure a high level of national cultivation in the future. The text aims to show the myopia of the planned reform and, hence, to stop it from being implemented.

Finland’s PISA ranking is hardly used when criticizing the reform. In fact, PISA appears in only seven of the 25 sample stories in which the reform is seen as a threat to Finnish basic education. One dominant way of coming to terms with PISA in this context is to claim that the new core curriculum excessively curtails the autonomy of Finnish schools and teachers, thus endangering future PISA results. However, even in
this discussion the point is never made that the national decision runs contrary to how
national education experts explain the country’s high PISA ranking. In fact, the fact that
the PISA success is explained in contradictory terms to the logic of the reform, it is not
even used as political capital in the domestic field to oppose the reform. Rather, the
counter-arguments are made only in terms of negative effects of pupils’ future
performance:

Addressing an international seminar in Helsinki entitled Education in Finland –
the best in Europe? Professor Reijo Wilenius warned against the consequences
of the excessive unification of curricula…In Wilenius’ opinion one reason for
the good findings on competence is that the Finnish comprehensive school
system has been relatively open. Schools and teachers have also enjoyed
independence…According to Wilenius, standardized or uniform curricula might
restrict schools’ autonomy too much, and competence findings might deteriorate.
“Freedom is the best method” Wilenius assured his audience, as befits a
discussion session of the European Forum on Freedom in Education.

(Helsingin Sanomat, domestic news, 9 June 2006)

Considering the Finnish media discourse as a whole, PISA and the curriculum seem to
appear in two separate discussions. Both issues are present in the media but clearly
separate from each other. Interestingly, the reform itself does not receive as much media
attention as one would anticipate. Its appropriateness is questioned in places, but the
reform and its aims are also defended.
Discussion

In this study, I set out to examine how it was possible to carry through a curriculum reform in Finland that ran contrary to how national educational experts have interpreted the reasons behind the country’s resounding PISA success. The paradox was glossed by analyzing the national PISA publicity, particularly the ways in which PISA was framed and, thus, constructed in the national media, and how this national PISA publicity may have affected the national curriculum reform publicity and the decisions made concerning that reform.

The analysis shows that in the national media, PISA was mainly used to argue how Finnish basic education serves as the best in the world and how Finnish education policy has been successful. The media also reported on the potential problems existing in Finnish education despite Finland’s PISA success. Nevertheless, the problems claimed to exist in Finnish education did not form any uniform “grand design” for how Finnish education should be improved. Rather, the focal story told in the media delivered an image of Finnish education being in good shape, how the Finnish education system was internationally acclaimed, and that any shortcomings in the Finnish system should be remedied in order to do well in future assessments.

The reform discussion, for its part, was very moderate in nature, comprising both arguments for and against the reform. Interestingly, PISA was hardly invoked as a weapon when attacking the reform. PISA was used to argue that the new standardized curricula curbed the autonomy of Finnish schools and teachers too much, thus endangering Finland’s future prospects in PISA. However, even in this connection the
argument was not made that the reform introduced invalidated the virtues highlighted by national educational experts as leading to Finland’s good PISA performance. Rather, the reform was debated like any education policy issue in the domestic media where different national actors expressed their views concerning the reform while simultaneously aiming at safeguarding their interests and future prospects.

To understand why the national PISA success was not articulated as a political weapon rolled out scandalously in the Finnish press and by which the national curriculum reform could have been impeded, I argue that there are two distinct reasons. First, due to Finland’s high ranking in PISA, the interpretation that Finnish education is superior to others and that this is largely due to successful Finnish education policy, was firmly rooted in the Finnish public. In this connection, it would have been outrageous to put out a story in total contradiction to the one firmly rooted in the national public and claim how, contrary to common belief, Finnish education policy is not unified. This kind of coverage was peculiar to countries in which the preliminary estimates concerning the domestic education system were relatively high as shown, for instance by German and Japan researchers (Dobbins & Martens, 2010; Martens & Niemann, 2010; Takayama, 2008). In these countries, after PISA revealed that the national education system may not be as good as expected, it was easy for the national media to debate this unexpected poor performance and seek reasons for the poor results.

In Finland, on the contrary, the general assumption was that the national education system was working well, and thus the country would rank quite high in the PISA comparison. However, probably only a few anticipated that Finland would rank at the
very top in all rounds conducted and in each area assessed. Since this was the case, it was perfectly natural for the Finnish media to highlight how well Finnish pupils were doing against their foreign peers and seek to explain the factors behind Finland’s PISA success.

Second, the reason why the curriculum reform caused no uproar in the Finnish press may be that after the first PISA results were publicized in December 2001, no overall explanation was forthcoming for Finland’s success, and the public discussion did not focus on the controversy between the publicly evinced explanations for Finland’s PISA success and the new curriculum in the making. Rather, the media discussion focused on marveling at the superiority of the Finnish education system and its specific characteristics.

Particularly due to this positive public image of Finnish education and education policy as successful and reliable, and the absence of any public consensus on which particular factor best explained Finland’s high scores in PISA, the work of Finnish decision-makers and reformers was not questioned in the public. Hence, they could continue uninterrupted with their reform work.

The interpretations made in this study are, of course, only based on readings of how the media work and how this affects national policymaking. Needless to say, there are plenty of other, equally plausible reasons which have contributed to the reform, but which are not examined in this case study. For instance, as emphasized in the introduction, the curriculum reform may be due to the fact that the needs analysis
conducted by the NBE had revealed that the former framework curriculum was moving in the right direction but was still inadequate to meet future challenges. Hence, the NBE launched a reform to address these challenges and to continuously improve the learning outcomes of Finnish basic education. On the other hand, the preparation of the reform was also started long before the first PISA results came out. For this reason, when the first PISA results were released in 2001, the spirit of the 2004 curriculum reform was already decided and work was underway. On those grounds, one may argue that the reform was not called off since according to the findings of the central administration there were strong national reasons for it, and because there were no reliable explanations let alone national consensus that particularly the autonomy given to the local level, better than the other factors, would best explain Finland’s PISA success.

To prove the correctness of these reasons would, however, require examination of different research material. However, these explanations in any case do not sufficiently account for why the media did not seize on the topic and report how Finnish education policy decisions are not consistent with how Finnish educational experts explain Finland’s PISA success. As I have emphasized earlier, the national media serve as a forum where different nationally important issues come up and where they are discussed actively. The national media particularly highlights issues in which, according to the general interpretation, there lies something mysterious or even scandalous (e.g. Adut, 2008; Lull & Hinerman, 1997; Thompson, 2000; Tumber & Waisbord, 2004). In light of Finland’s success in PISA, however, it would appear that the interpretation totally at odds with what has been stated about our national education and especially its success in connection with PISA could not be publicly accommodated or condoned in Finland.
As a consequence of this, the reform of the national curriculum was not accorded criticism and could be pushed through without interruption.

This case study also enhances our understanding of how good PISA performance can have an influence on national policies. As I discussed earlier, existing studies propose that only poor success in PISA appears to have an effect on domestic policies, and this if and only if the national PISA performance is framed as crucial in the domestic media and if a substantial gap between the national self-perception and the empirical results can be observed. Based on the findings made in this case study, however, I argue that good national PISA performance can also have an effect on domestic political decision-making. It can make possible national reforms totally devoid of any direct connection to the international assessment. Drawing particularly on Adut’s theory of the public sphere, I argue that the positive publicity of national policymaking, in this case of Finnish education policy, always entails power. When the domestic media constructs the national policymaking as successful and reliable, national policymakers have the freedom to practice their policy uninterrupted (Adut, 2012, p. 247). As PISA revealed that the Finnish education system is of higher quality than expected, public discussion in Finland did not focus on the workings of the central government. Instead, the media highlighted the unexpected success of Finnish education and the potential reasons behind it.

However, as underlined by Adut, the consequences of positive publicity can be double-edged. While positive publicity of domestic policymaking can guarantee industrial peace for policy makers under some circumstances, it also increases expectations from
them. “The publicity that a political actor enjoys, while potentially glorifying and immunizing him in the short run, will also ultimately saddle him with unrealistically high expectations from the audience. This will often eventuate in dissatisfaction and distrust” (Adut, 2012, p. 248). By this Adut means that when policy makers fail to meet public expectations, everything they do falls under the public’s inspection. This seems to be so for Japan and Germany. In these countries, public expectations of the national education system were rather high before PISA. After PISA revealed that German and Japanese teenagers do not perform as well as expected, the entire education went under public scrutiny and politicians and decision-makers were called to account. If and when politicians and decision-makers succeed in meeting the expectations from the audience, or even exceed them, which seems to be again the case in Finland, the national reform work can be continued uninterrupted. Without specific opposition from the public politicians and other actors responsible for the national curriculum reform could pursue their objectives and continue uninterrupted with the work they claimed to be nationally justified.

This case study also enriches our understanding of how international comparisons such as PISA work in national contexts. Instead of claiming that international organizations and the comparisons they produce harmonize national policies, based on the findings made in this case study I argue, they contribute to synchronizing national policies. International assessments such as PISA trigger policy debates in the local contexts in which comparisons are invoked when defending or criticizing existing policies. However, not all comparisons, ideas, models or trends circulating in the world catch attention, let alone trigger a debate in the nation-state. The “success” of a comparison or
idea depends on whether local players see them as potentially advantageous for their own national policies but, more importantly, for their own political interests and positions. If the points highlighted by the comparisons are favorable for domestic actors and their interests, these are easily taken up. In the cases of Germany and Japan, the poor results in international comparisons are easily utilized by reformers, actors who aim to justify the necessity of the reforms by the poor ranking of their own country. This case, for its part, shows that good results are also easily taken up by national actors. By the good results achieved in international assessments different national actors justify the functionality of existing systems, although these good results are also used to substantiate the need for changes to the existing systems in order to do even better in future comparisons. Through these local applications, globally shared images of desirable national education systems and practices become assumed in national contexts thus leading to synchronization of national policies. In other words, by reacting to PISA nation-states make similar political moves. However, due to the varied natures of local field battles, nation-states may end up introducing quite different policy reforms. In Japan and Germany, different reforms have been introduced in the wake of PISA, whereas in Finland, PISA does not seem to have set off reforms. By this, I do not mean that in Finland PISA does not have an effect. If anything, it seems that in Finland the national PISA success made it easy for politicians and decision-makers to continue with their policy as before. As PISA did not provide any worthy assets for criticism, the workings of the Finnish central administration were not interfered by the public and the Finnish curriculum reform could be followed through uninterrupted.

Endnotes
1 For what PISA assesses, see: [http://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisafaq/#background_and_basics](http://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisafaq/#background_and_basics)

2 From the selected media only *Helsingin Sanomat* and *Suomen Kuvalehti* publish letters to the editor.

3 The data of *Suomen Kuvalehti* covers only the time period April 2002 – April 2009; the stories published prior to this were not electronically filed and thus not available.

4 In the media, the curriculum reform was referred to, for instance, by using expressions such as ‘the new curriculum’ or ‘the new proposal for the allocation of hours’.

5 The total number of stories discussing PISA is 602. The curriculum for Finnish basic education is discussed in 761 stories. All text extracts included in the final analysis have been translated by a native speaker.

6 I coded a significant sample of the stories to identify the frames in my analysis, which I confirmed are evident throughout the stories in each corpus.
References


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