CHAPTER 1

Introduction: What Can We Learn About Global Education from Historical and Global Policy Studies of the OECD?

Christian Ydesen

The OECD and the Contours of a Global Governing Complex in Education

One of the key speakers at the first conference on education held by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in Washington, D.C., in 1961 made a remarkable statement (OECD 1961: 35):

> *[T]he fight for education is too important to be left solely to the educators.*

More than anything, this statement signals that education was becoming increasingly politicized in the context of the Cold War, and it became a battlefield between multiple stakeholders' and professionals' values and knowledge forms, as well as political visions and priorities. Today, the global order of education is characterized by various types of international organizations, edu-businesses, and powerful nation-states continuously

C. Ydesen (✉)
Department of Culture and Learning, Aalborg University, Aalborg, Denmark
e-mail: cyd@hum.aau.dk

C. Ydesen (ed.), *The OECD's Historical Rise in Education*, Global Histories of Education,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-33799-5_1

shaping education systems across the globe, via networks, programs, and initiatives in general, and comparisons, benchmarking, and standards in particular.

Historically, the contemporary governing complex in education has emerged from both the collaboration and struggles between various agents and stakeholders. Bürgi's (2017: 304) recent chapter on the historical role of the OECD in education calls for more research on precisely the structural and existential interdependencies between 'national and international bureaucracies and on the interplay between them'. Picking up the baton, this book considers the OECD a highly relevant object for an analysis of such an interplay. As an intergovernmental organization made up of its member states and with no economic 'big stick' to enforce adherence to its policy recommendations, the OECD exercises its power and influence as the central cog of a global governing complex (Schmelzer 2012). The OECD has been key in the development of the way global governance in education works, and today, the OECD is widely recognized as a global authority in education because of its unique role in governance by comparison and the production of educational norms and paradigms, such as educational measurement indicators (Martens and Jakobi 2010). In an era of overproduction of data and evidence, the OECD has managed to establish itself as a key supplier and interpreter of the type of evidence appreciated by politicians and decision-makers who can ascribe their narratives to numbers; the watchwords here are simplification, comparability, and decontextualization.

However, while most research recognizes the enormous importance of the OECD as a global education policy shaper, little effort has been made in gaining a better understanding of the developments and events that made it possible for the OECD to assume this dominant role. More than 70 years have passed since the foundation of its predecessor, the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation (OEEC). Back then, the organization counted 18 members; today, the OECD has 36 members and numerous partnerships around the globe; for instance, 80 countries and economies participated in the 2018 round of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). It is high time to revisit the historical events and developments that have put education on the economic agenda and which have shaped and informed the very way education is construed and enacted across the globe today.

The Global Governing Complex and International Organizations

As demonstrated in much of the contemporary research, a key feature of the global order of education is that the selected variables, underlying assumptions, concepts, categories, logarithms, and modes of counting constituting the backbone of seemingly objective education data form a powerful governing complex (Brøgger 2019; Gorur 2017; Grek 2009; Hultqvist et al. 2018; Iriye 2002; Williamson and Piattoeva 2018). The role of international organizations in this governing complex is often characterized by soft governance, meaning that international organizations shape the policies of nation-states via the production of policy ideas, policy evaluations, and data generation (Leimgruber and Schmelzer 2017a). Drawing on the work of Hawkins et al. (2006), Niemann and Martens (2018; 269) argue that

> *IO soft governance implies that although international organizations are set up by states and consist of state delegates, they are able to develop their own positions, ideas, or dynamics because of intra-organizational networks and interactions that cannot be fully controlled by any principals.*

Although soft governance is a common denominator, the international organizations each have very different dispositions and instruments at their disposal. Therefore, the interactions between international organizations and nation-states remain complex, ambiguous, and even elusive (Christensen and Ydesen 2015). As pointed out by Moisio (2014), higher education policymaking in Finland has resorted to a 'policy spin', where national goals are fed back into the Finnish system via the European Union after having been 'planted' by Finnish policymakers. Moisio's example points to the multilayered character of global education governance. Nevertheless, it also suggests that international organizations constitute vital hubs of education governance, because they disseminate, coordinate, and evaluate policy programs, performance, and data production but, at the same time, also obscure the various processes and actors behind the scenes (e.g. via feed-in/feedback mechanisms, open methods of coordination and/or multilateral surveillance; see Brøgger 2019; Krejsler, this volume).

In other words, the contemporary governing complex in education leaves a big role for international organizations—in collaboration with

funders, partners, and stakeholders—to set the standards of what is considered good education worldwide. The implication is that the governing complex revolving around international organizations has a significant impact on the legitimation of knowledge, education curricula, and even our understanding of the very purpose of education.

History, Education, and the OECD

Beginning as the OEEC in 1948, the OECD gradually took over the leading role from other international organizations in setting new agendas for education globally, culminating thus far with the launch of PISA in 2000 (Morgan 2009). A recurrent and forceful characteristic of the OECD's paradigm in education has been a global vision of education as a source of human capital, which is needed to address social challenges and improve the economies of nation-states (Bray and Varghese 2011; Elfert, this volume; Elvin 1961; Spring 2015; Tröhler 2011). In other words, education is viewed as an economic production factor in general, and as a tool for maximizing the outcomes of a nation's available human resources in particular.

Although this line of thinking has a long history predating the formation of the OEEC/OECD—for instance, the liberal political philosopher John Locke (1632–1704) sees education as an investment that would increase a person's economic value (Locke 1695/2000)—the organization's version of it amounts to a very utilitarian paradigm of education that is deeply concerned with evaluation, accountability, and the facilitation of cross-national governance in order to achieve 'best practice'. Historically, the pillars underpinning this economic paradigm in education have been human capital theory and concerns about educational investment optimization, effectiveness, manpower planning, and the question of how education can sustain economic success (Ydesen and Bomholt 2019). In other words, and in trying to achieve a deeper understanding of the contemporary governing complex in education, it is reasonable to speak of historical sequences containing the seeds of a merger between education, governance, and economics—in terms of quantifiable methods (indicators, metrics, numbers, and data), accountability systems (the visibility and comparability of education stakeholders' performance), and the very purposes of education (human resource management and economic growth).

Starting from these observations, it is the purpose of this book to understand the workings, mechanisms, range, and impact of the OECD's

work in education from a historical, international, and global perspective across member and non-member states. The book thus aims to bridge the research fields of policy studies and the history of education, seeing the current scholarship on the history of international organizations in the field of education as a logical addition to the present-day perspective of policy studies. From this vantage point, it is this book's ambition to contribute to our understanding of the contemporary global governing complex in education.

Historically Informed Policy Research on the OECD's Role in Global Education Governance

Introducing a book about the OECD's role in global education governance from historical perspectives calls for reflections on its approach and framework. In the social sciences, Charles Tilly (2006: 433) argues that 'every significant political phenomenon lives in history and requires historically grounded analysis for its explanation', and Pierre Bourdieu emphasizes that every social object must be understood as a historical one and that it is imperative to historicize the research object in question to achieve understanding (Steinmetz 2011). Much contemporary historical research on the OECD subscribes to the same arguments, insofar as it insists on considering the present and the past under a single analytical lens. For instance, Leimgruber and Schmelzer (2017b: 6) argue that 'analyzing the OECD as a Cold War institution… helps in understanding the OECD more generally, also at present, in its geopolitical dimension and its search for a new, post-Cold-War role'. In this sense, Leimgruber and Schmelzer (2017a: 5) argue that 'highlighting the OECD soft power functions may shed light on its distinctive modes of governance, but this perspective impedes a more thorough understanding of the OECD's role among postwar multilateral organizations'. Bürgi (2017: 286) agrees and argues that we cannot interpret the processes surrounding PISA 'merely from a post-Cold War perspective'. Thus, it seems that historical perspectives have something valuable to contribute to policy research.

Although these arguments appear sound from both a common-sense and a scholarly perspective, they refrain from addressing the philosophical problem pointed out by some philosophers of history, such as Leopold von Ranke (1795–1896). Since the nineteenth century, much historical research—most prominently influenced by the launch of historism—has been based on the premise that the past is irreversibly gone and can never

again be invoked. In historiography, this premise is nurtured by a shift from the recognition of exemplarity to the understanding of earlier epochs on their own terms. For Ranke and, more recently, Ulrich Muhlack, learning from history is highly problematic (Assis 2014).

It is therefore necessary to consider how and to what extent the past can be used to shed light on the present. According to philosopher David Favrholdt (2004), it is possible to speak of structural similarities between historical and contemporary events and developments. Such an analysis comparing constructed time periods, however, quickly becomes problematic because of idiosyncrasies and unique contextual factors. However, according to Haydu (1998: 341), 'we can remedy the deficiencies of conventional comparative methods by rethinking the connections between events in different time periods as reiterated problem solving'. In that sense, Haydu argues that combining a focus on historical and contemporary problem-solving processes, the narratives surrounding these processes, and a meticulous empirical analysis of path dependencies can help specify how contingencies shape historical change and impose both temporal and explanatory order upon events 'without foregoing causal explanation' (Haydu 1998: 349).

In other words, some themes that run through history do not sustain causality but, nonetheless, lend explanatory power to historical developments. Following this line of thinking, our addition to Haydu's argument is that, if we consider time and experience to be something that extends across the past, present, and future, then history becomes a reservoir of communalities, for instance, organizations populated by human beings with lived experiences of timeless themes such as love, power, competition, recognition, work life ambitions, and the transmission of legacies.

Returning to the historiography of the OECD, we can see these arguments make sense when considering the three core claims of Leimgruber and Schmelzer's (2017a: 5–6) historical perspective, which all seem to reflect significant elements of problem solving:

> *Firstly, the history of the OECD is better understood if one analyzes it as the organization's continuous endeavour to reinvent itself after it had lost its original purpose at the end of the Marshall Plan.*
>
> *Secondly, during much of its history, the OECD was not (or not primarily) a think tank but served other important functions (e.g. an 'economic NATO').*
>
> *And finally, the OECD is characterized by its survival strategies in competition with other international organizations, by its fundamental (geo)political*

and identity-defining role, by formal and informal hierarchies, by restricted spaces within the organization, and by internal rivalries, both between countries and between its different directorates.

Looking specifically at education, we find a historical research perspective offers several things to our contemporary understanding of global education governance.

First, such a focus increases awareness of the precursors of contemporary programs and developments. From this perspective, a triadic train of contingencies emerges where the OEEC European Productivity Agency and its productivity imperative form the background of the OECD's educational programs in the 1960s (Bürgi, this volume). The International Education Indicators (INES) project, launched in 1988, serves as a precursor to PISA (Grek and Ydesen 2021), while PISA contemporarily serves as a breeding ground for other related OECD policy products, including PISA for Schools, PISA4U, AHELO, PIAAC, and PISA for Development (Lewis, this volume).

Second, a historical perspective facilitates knowledge about trajectories and path dependencies, which often define new spaces of opportunities. In making this point about opportunities, we draw on the German historian Reinhart Koselleck's (1923–2006) conceptual pair of 'horizon of experience' and 'space of expectation', which together create new spaces of opportunities beyond the limit of what has already been attained (Pickering 2004). One example, emphasizing path dependency, is that education officially appeared on the OEEC/OECD agenda right after the Sputnik shock in 1957, but the distinct approach to education adopted by the organization had much earlier roots, in ideas about education as an economic production factor, an object of optimization, and the source of a nation's human capital. Another example, highlighting the aspect of new opportunities, is the reform of the education section between 1967 and 1970, with the institutionalization of the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI), leading to the education section officially starting to work more qualitatively on education policy issues instead of merely conducting descriptive, quantitative, and comparative studies, as had been the main focus of the Committee for Scientific and Technical Personnel (Centeno 2017, this volume).

Third, a historical research perspective also enables a focus on continuities and ruptures as an analytical lens. For instance, the OECD has been consistent in linking education with economic concerns, but it was not

until the United States threatened to withdraw financial support for CERI in the early 1980s that intense work on the development of standardized indicators—the INES program—was launched (Addey 2018). In this sense, the INES program exemplifies a rupture with one perspective; from another perspective, however, it linked up with the 1960s effort to develop quantitative indicators as emphasized by the then OEEC director Alexander King (OEEC 1960; see also Chap. 14, this volume).

Through increased knowledge about historical contingencies, a historical approach can create awareness of the historical constructs of today's education policies that otherwise seem to operate in a naturalized way according to an inherent logic. In that sense, historical perspectives can also feed into a human emancipation project (Foucault 1977).

Work from such a perspective requires in-depth case-study analysis, as well as access to and often even cross-checking within and across different archives. At the same time, it often requires that the researcher draw on other disciplines, such as comparative education, sociology, and political science, in an eclectic manner. However, this also enables us to move beyond methodological nationalism and into the fields of global and transnational history. As argued by Matasci and Droux (2019: 234), 'the transnational paradigm, with its focus on the study of exchanges, interconnections, and circulatory regimes, has undoubtedly given new life to the history of international organizations'. Doing so, we can open up the black box of the OECD and see how it has been working, the struggles and crises it has gone through, and how it has been able to achieve such power in global education today.

The combination of a historical perspective—drawing on primary archival sources from the OECD Archives in Paris and national archives around the globe, as well as interviews with key agents—with an education policy perspective provides a comprehensive view of the work of the OECD in education. By tackling the OECD from diverse points of view and in various historical and geographical contexts, this book offers a broad understanding of the continuities and ruptures in the historical journey taken by the OECD as it became the most influential International Organisation (IO) in education, and contributes to a better understanding of the interdependencies between international organizations and (member and non-member) countries. One of the book's main contributions is to show how the technologies of organization become intertwined with different cultural worlds of meaning, becoming visible not only on a policy level but also on a structural level that contains the very governance architecture of the respective countries.

From a historiographical perspective, the book offers a contribution to both global and world histories, as well as Eckhardt Fuchs' notion of transnational history as a historiographical field, which studies the relations, entanglements, and dependencies at the transnational level and contextualizes events at the national level (Fuchs 2014; Fuchs and Vera 2019).

Organization and Structure

The first part of the book zooms in on the background of the OECD's rise to its role as a global authority in education. Chronologically, the focus is on the OEEC era, between 1948 and 1961, and then up until the early 1970s, when education became firmly integrated into the OECD organization. In this sense, this part of the book establishes a solid and common frame of reference for the analyses in the following two parts of the book.

Chapter 2, by Regula Bürgi, looks at the European Productivity Agency (EPA), established in May 1953 as a semi-autonomous operational arm under the OEEC, intended to 'stimulate' the productivity of Europe's economy as an educational enterprise. The chapter demonstrates the branched-out cultural and political change effects of the EPA's work and initiatives, in terms of both Western societies and the OEEC/OECD organization itself.

Chapter 3, by Maren Elfert, traces the historical origins of the OECD's role in actively shaping and diffusing the economics of education. From this platform, the chapter argues that PISA is largely a continuation of the economics of education approach.

In Chap. 4, Vera G. Centeno provides a historical account of the OECD's official involvement in education policy and offers an analysis of the OECD's rapid emergence as a policy actor in the field. Drawing on a systematic analysis of unpublished internal documents, the chapter traces what happened within the organization before and after the creation of CERI.

The second part of the book addresses the difficult issue of discerning the impact of OECD educational initiatives and programs, and raises the question of how the OECD's educational recommendations and programs have impacted member and non-member states. Dealing with this question, the authors each relate in different ways to the triangular role of IGOs—as instrument, arena, and actor—noted in international relations research (e.g. Archer 2001; Centeno 2021), as well as how we can understand its impact (e.g. Christensen and Ydesen 2015). This perspective

involves an ambition to understand the power relations in the historical processes that gave rise to the OECD's dominating role in global education.

Chapter 5 is written by Frederik Forrai Ørskov and looks at the interactions between the OECD and Australian policymakers in the field of education in the 1970s. The chapter highlights the importance of looking at the movements between the different spatial levels of analysis when tracing the ability of international organizations to obtain their ideas and visions 'out of house'. It concludes that Australia's membership in the OECD greatly strengthened the national government vis-à-vis the federal states that had constitutionally controlled education.

Chapter 6, by Gabriela Toledo Silva, focuses on Brazil's National Institute of Educational Research as a vehicle for facilitating and mediating cooperation between the OECD and the Brazilian public education sector between 1996 and 2006. The chapter concludes that education was transformed in a variety of ways and that there is a marked difference between what was planned and how the changes were later described.

Using Denmark as a case, Chap. 7, by Karen Egedal Andreasen, raises the question of democracy in education in relation to the ways OECD policies and programs affect national education policy and practice. The chapter argues the presence of a political dimension in PISA and problematizes the democratic deficit in contemporary education policymaking.

In Chap. 8, Yihuan Zou reviews the collaborations between the OECD and China, how OECD ideas have been used in the Chinese context, and how the OECD's impacts on Chinese education can be understood in the global context. The chapter finds that OECD's ideas have mainly been used for new approaches to accountability and mechanisms for legitimating policies in the Chinese educational field.

In Chap. 9, Felicitas Acosta compares the Southern Cone countries of Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile and how these three countries of the Southern Hemisphere have established relations with the OECD at the level of the educational system through the implementation of PISA tests. The chapter finds both convergences and divergences in the rationales for participating in standardized assessments. It argues the presence of a new kind of educationalization advanced by systematic assessments of education systems by an independent organization such as the OECD.

The third part of the book is dedicated to exploring the OECD's education initiatives and programs from a global perspective. Highlighting the precursors and enactments of salient transnational policy trends

launched and sustained by the OECD, this part of the book provides observations and analytical tools to enable a better understanding of the workings of the contemporary governing complex in education.

Chapter 10, written by Jessica Holloway, analyzes the OECD's campaign for distributed leadership and points out the risks of pushing greater accountability and teacher responsibility. The chapter problematizes the global campaign for distributed leadership as situated within prevailing accountability discourses that value data-driven orientations of schooling over democratic ones.

Chapter 11, written by Antoni Verger, Clara Fontdevila, and Lluís Parcerisa, analyzes the OECD's governance mechanisms through the construction of school autonomy with accountability as a global policy model. Specifically, the chapter analyzes the governance mechanisms through which these reforms are being promoted by the OECD, namely, data gathering, education policy evaluation, and the generation of policy ideas through different knowledge products and policy spaces.

In Chap. 12, John Benedicto Krejsler argues that we can learn much by exploring how dominant Northern nations, in their fears of falling behind among 'global knowledge economies', produce imaginaries that affect how global standards are construed. The chapter adds to research on the traveling of policy between dominant and less dominant regions in the world, questioning how and by what parameters they become comparable.

Chapter 13 is written by Steven Lewis and takes a close look at two key OECD programs: the school-focused PISA for schools and the teacher-focused PISA4U. Both instruments enable international benchmarking and policy learning for decidedly more local schooling spaces and actors. The chapter shows how the OECD has enabled a whole series of new relations with a diverse array of local schooling spaces and actors.

Chapter 14, written by the editor, is a concluding chapter that reviews the 13 preceding chapters and draws conclusions about how we can understand the formation and workings of the global governing complex in education.

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