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Comparing Policies in a  
Globalising World:  
Methodological Reflections

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**Abstract:**

Globalisation has often been seen as throwing a lifeline to comparative education (CE), for that seemed, on the face of it, to be the academic approach most suited to identifying and evaluating the consequences for education policy and practice in a globalising world. And, indeed, there has been much activity in this revived field of study. However, our argument in this chapter is that such contributions from comparative education have been (a) based on extensions and elaborations of existing methodological approaches in the field, assuming rather than problematising the empirical comparability of national and regional education systems in seeking to establish the “effects” of “policy” in a “globalising” “world”; and (b) designed in ways which enable, or promote, the possibility of comparison as evaluation, rather than as a means of explanation. Our approach is based on the assumption that such problematisation is essential, and that it depends fundamentally on shifting the level of abstraction through which we approach those categories: asking how what counts as policy was determined, and in whose interests in any given case; and what we need to do methodologically to make policies, conceptions of globalisation and of the nature of the “world” comparable as the key means of explaining them.

**Keywords:** international comparison, methodology, educational policies, education systems, PISA

## 1 Introduction

This chapter explores the methodological challenges in comparing education policies in a globalising world. We begin with the claim that, for the most part, though education policies, programmes and practices have been, and continue to be, located in national territorial spaces, though this does not mean the global was absent. Rather it is possible to detect a ‘thin’ global policy regime in the years following World War II until the 1980s. With the advance of neoliberalism as a global political project, there has been a thickening of regional and global policy making activity arising from, and in turn driving, the transformation of national and sub-national education spaces, policies and outcomes. Such transformations have generated important challenges for researchers of education, largely as education policies are no longer ‘national’ or indeed made by national states.

Our aim in this chapter is to sketch out the contours of the changes that have taken place in the governance of education systems as a result of global processes and the challenges to this presents us with regarding how we study, and compare, education policies. We do this by way of four ‘isms’ which we problematise as litmusses of global educational change. We then raise the question of critical comparison, and point to two conflicting ways that it can be used in studying the nature, form and outcomes of education policies. In the final section of the paper we offer three (not exhaustive) methodological reflections – each with a different dimension through which to explore global education processes; ‘time’, ‘space’, and ‘logics of governing’ in education policymaking.

## 2 ‘Isms’

We start by pointing out that in order to study and compare global education policies, we need to be mindful of the conceptual categories we use – in large part because though the name of the category might remain the same, the meaning of that category – (e.g. state, nation, education, university) may well have changed. We have referred to the practice of deploying these same categories without asking questions about the meaning of that category, as methodological isms (Robertson and Dale, 2008). The basis of the way we understand and seek to use the term ‘isms’ comes from Herminio Martins (1974), the coiner of the term ‘methodological nationalism’. He sees it as representative of “...a general presumption (in sociological analysis) ... that the ‘total’ or ‘inclusive’ society, in effect the nation-state, be deemed to be the standard, optimal or even maximal ‘isolate’ for social analysis (Martins, 1974: 276; quoted in Chernilo, 2006: 7). His notion of a ‘general presumption’ captures the essence of what we mean by ‘isms’. These categories are treated in a ‘pre-theoretical’ way; that is, they are too obvious in their (assumed unchanging and unchanged) form to require explicit theorising despite the fact that wider institutional arrangements and social relations world are changing. We refer to this as ‘isms’; they are fixed, frozen and taken-for-granted, and as a result they act as an important restriction on the scope and targets of investigation. The four ‘isms’ we will discuss here are methodological nationalism; methodological statism; educationism; and spatial fetishism.

Methodological nationalism tends to equate ‘society’ with ‘the nation’ and whilst this may well have described a particular reality at a particular time, increasingly this is far from the case (Dale, 2005: 126). This is exacerbated by the tendency to juxtapose an unreconstructed methodological nationalism to underspecified conceptions of ‘globalisation’ in a zero-sum relationship. That is, as the global has taken on more functions and power, this has been assumed to be at the expense of a new disempowered state. However, in many instances the national state has itself been a major force in advancing regional and global projects, for instance Germany in relation to Europe, or the United States in relation to the rise of the World Trade Organization, and the development of the General Agreement on Trade in Services to push forward the development of a globally competitive services economy.

*Methodological statism* refers to the tendency to assume there is a particular *form* intrinsic to all states. Further, methodological statism tends to take the version of the ‘state’ as found in ‘Western democracy’ as ‘*the* organizing principle of political modernity’ (Fine, 2003: 460, quoted in Chernilo, 2006: 12). For Chernilo (2006: 12) this constitutes the “...rather mythical image of the nation state as

the final and necessary form of social and political organisation in modernity”. As a result it makes *political* rather than economic or cultural boundaries the dominant means of differentiating societies from each other. This in turn sets distinct limits to both the basis, and hence product, of useful comparison.

However, in a globalising era, the particular combination of responsibilities and activities that nation-states have been assumed to be responsible for can now be seen as historically contingent rather than functionally necessary, or even optimal, to the point where the question can be raised about the “...implications of a world in which the mutually reinforcing relations of territory, authority and societal interests and identities can no longer be taken for granted” (Ruggie, 1993: 9).

The depth of the penetration of these kinds of assumptions on the social sciences is summed up by Ruggie (1993: 143) as displaying “an extraordinarily impoverished mind-set [...] that is able to visualize long term challenges to the system of states only in terms of entities that are institutionally substitutable for the state”. The point here is not to suggest the state as an actor is unimportant. Rather it is to focus upon, first, the way the Westphalian state represents itself as a universal form rather than a particular representation that has been universalised, and second, on the way the state itself, as an historically and culturally shaped project and container of power, has evaded close intellectual scrutiny. In relation to this first point, of the universalisation of the form of the state, this has made investigations into, for example, the rise of the European Union as a different state form, difficult (see Shore, 2006). Alternatively, we limit our understanding of the cultural, political and economic specificities of the Chinese state by looking at it through Western eyes (Jacques, 2009).

*Methodological educationism* refers to the tendency to regard ‘education’ as a single category for purposes of analysis, with an unproblematically accepted set of common objectives, as well as shared knowledges, practices, assumptions and outcomes. This state of affairs has likely arisen because education continues to be the central project in modernising societies. Educational systems are almost invariably seen as rationalising social projects whose universal expansion necessarily brings improvement and emancipation. This results in education being treated as abstract, fixed, absolute, ahistorical and universal, when, for instance, no distinctions are made between its use to describe purposes, processes, practices, and outcomes. In flattening ‘education’ in this way the basis of rigorous comparison is not only made invisible but also denied. Fundamentally, ‘educationism’ is the product and instantiation of analyses based in examining definitions and examples, rather than in examining the range of what is *done* in the name of these definitions—which, crucially, may be unintended as well as

intended. It is assumed to be ameliorative, with any questions to do with the forms and outcomes of the attempts at amelioration. So, the crucial point for us here is that ‘education’ requires explanation rather than being taken for granted.

Our final ‘ism’ is *spatial fetishism*. Brenner (2003: 38) describes *spatial fetishism* as “...a conception of social space that is timeless and static, and thus immune to the possibility of historical change”. Failing to problematise space, or to see that space is constituted by, and constitutive of, social relations and structures, is a problem for the analysis of education policy more generally, and global education policy more specifically. Put a different way, most education policies are aimed at re/organising and re/ordering social relations through structures and strategies. As a result, education policies, concerned as they are with structures and social relations are always spatial in some way.

Yet, it is also evident that some spatial arrangements do not matter in terms of their outcomes, whilst others do. For instance, global policies such as school choice typically do for they will have very different spatial implications for families; not all families will have the financial resources, time, or conditions of work, to move children across the city so as to access a school that might be the ‘best choice’ (Ball et al., 1995). Other families will face not having a choice, as their village or town only has one school. Space also matters in the organisation of learning. And indeed, some education policies might have, as their intended purpose and outcome, the separation of social groups – smart kids in science streams versus the not-so-smart kids in general streams; girls in girls-only schools, boys in boys-only-schools, and so on.

If we add the category ‘global’ to our analysis, we need to ask: what kind of category is it? And, what work does it enable/disable in relation to the national, or local as alternative scales from which strategic projects of rule are launched? In this case, we are interested in the education policy work that those actors operating with a global scale horizon advance. In some cases this scale enables actors to act in rather more omnipotent ways – with the global invoked as a higher form of authority and rule. In other cases, the global enables policy projects to advance quickly – unencumbered by institutions and other actors who might have different views about the probity or not of these policies. Rescaling is thus a useful spatial move for education policy makers. For the comparative theorist, the question to be asked is: what is the role of space in global policy, and how might we compare the different capacities of policy actors to engage spatially.

### **3 Critical Comparison**

There are two main ways that we can approach ‘comparison’. On the one hand, we can ask: *in what contexts is it useful, to whom, and for what purposes?* And on the other hand we might ask: *what does it tell us about the relationships between the different contexts and outcomes—what elements can be identified as important and how?* The differences between these two sets of questions are important in understanding the contribution of comparison in addressing issues of the governance of education. In the first case, comparison is used as a ‘resource’; a contribution to the achievement of particular ends. In the second case, comparison becomes the ‘topic’ of inquiry. In the first case, the findings themselves are taken to provide the explanation; in the second, they generate further sets of questions. The best example of the difference between these two approaches is the use of large, quantitative cross-national data sets. Those using comparison as a resource take these data for granted, and ask what we can learn from them. Those deploying comparison as a research topic/question ask: on what bases were these data compiled, and hence what is being compared?

This is an important issue in understanding global governance in and of education. In the first case, comparison itself becomes a tool of global governance, with comparison seen as a *resource*, whereas in the second case, comparison becomes the *topic* of investigation into how over time and space global governance strategies are advanced, with what outcomes, and so on. The first sees comparison as a tool for providing generalised solutions, the second as a means of generating explanations.

In adopting this second ‘topic’ oriented approach regarding critical comparison of global education policies, we need to ask ourselves: what exactly are we comparing? In our view this is an ontological and epistemological, *as well as* a methodological, question. By this we mean that in considering comparison methodologically, we are also making decisions about how we think the social world works, and what might count as a means of knowing that world. Does the social world operate according to a set of regularities, and in the world that global education policy is present in, are we able to bring those regularities into view and decide on what its causes what? Positivists are likely to argue yes, this is the case. Others might argue that the social world is simply a social construction by individuals. Understanding global education policy using this set of assumptions means exploring how individuals shape their own understandings around – for instance, a global policy – and from there comparisons can be made between different social constructions. Interpretivists are likely to place the weight of their approach on how meanings are constructed about experiences of events or social phenomena – such as how does one make sense of world class universities, or systems of audit? Or, do we argue that there is more to the social world than what we see, and that these less visible structures

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and conjunctions of possibilities, shape what it is possible to think, say, and do, and so therefore have effects.

This latter – broadly critical realist – approach is the one we favour, in that we take the view that social realities are socially stratified, and that the causal mechanisms and powers shaping events are not necessarily visible to the researcher, though the outcomes are (Sayer, 2000). Working backwards to work out the relationship between outcomes, mechanisms, and causal powers, is an important procedure for a critical realist researcher. Now let's complicate things by asking: what might a critical realist compare? Here we find George Steinmetz's (2004) work very helpful. Steinmetz (2004: 372) argues that comparison often "...operates along two dimensions – events and structures, corresponding to one of the main lines of ontological stratification of the social-real". While positivists tend to focus on 'events' and view social systems as fixed and closed, "...critical realists insist on the ontological difference between events and mechanisms and on the ubiquity of contingent, non-recurrent, conjunctural determination of events within open systems like the social. This means that even events incomparable at the phenomenal level still may be amenable to explanation in terms of a conjuncture of generative causal mechanisms" (Steinmetz, 2004: 372). Thus, our comparison will be at the level of our *explanations* of the underlying causal processes and mechanisms at work, and their outcomes – in this case for who gets what in relation to education. A critical realist approach to comparing global education policies would thus focus attention on the conjuncture of causal mechanisms and their outcomes, and it is our explanations of these processes at work that sits at the heart of critical comparison. We will return to this in our conclusion. For now, let's explore what might be gained by using different dimensions – time, space, governing tools and power – as a basis for comparison.

#### **4 Three Critical Methodological Reflections on Global Education Policies**

In this section we develop three methodological reflections around different dimensions through which comparisons can be made. These are by no means exhaustive. Rather, they are meant to encourage us to think imaginatively, systematically, and critically, about the different ways comparative research on global education policies can be carried out.

*Methodological Reflection 1: The value of temporal comparisons – global teacher policy – from 'thin' to 'thick' globalisation of education*

One way to compare education policies is by using *time* as a variable. From there we can decide on whether to compare synchronically (in time) or diachronically (across time), or both. By *synchronic* comparisons of global education policies we mean comparing, for example, different global institutions, and how these organisations have sought to shape an education policy issue during a particular temporal frame – such as between 2000-2015. Or, we can compare an issue area over time *diachronically*, and ask: what form, shape, and at what scale, did this education issue get framed, and what role did the global scale play over a given set of time period – for instance in the post-World War II period until 2000, and from 2000 until 2015. If one was ambitious, both of these temporal investigations into a policy issue, and the changing distribution of power and authority between policy actors, could be very revealing. The world does not stand still in education, and one of the most interesting developments in the education policy world has been the rise of global actors in shaping policy over the past decade, and the governing tools and instruments that have been developed that have enabled this.

Consider this policy question: *Has the governing of teachers' work changed over time and what, if any, role have the international agencies played in this?* The first move, of course, is to look back in time to determine if, indeed, international agencies had any role in shaping policy for teachers. After all, the development and growth of education systems has been tightly bound to the rise of the nation state. A second move would be to establish which international agencies took it upon themselves to shape teacher policy, and from there ask: when, why, and how?

Digging a little deeper, we begin to see that though national and sub-governments were the key shapers of teacher policy, this did not mean the international agencies were silent or disinterested. Far from it. Indeed two international agencies over the period 1950-2000 were very interested in teacher policy at the global level; UNESCO and the ILO (Robertson, 2012). Whilst respecting the right of Member States of the UN system to determine teacher policy, they nevertheless published an ILO/UNESCO Recommendation in October 1966 setting out the rights and responsibilities of teachers, including the international standards for their initial preparation and further education, recruitment, employment and so on. As a Recommendation, it did not have the weight of authority or legal 'bite' that one might see behind a sub/national teacher policy. This meant that governments in national settings could ignore this guidance. Connell (2009) suggests that this resulted in a broad range of approaches in national settings as to how teachers were prepared, what power and autonomy they might have in their schools, and so on.

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Further investigation reveals that the status quo held amongst the international agencies regarding teacher policy until around 2000, when agencies like the OECD (2000, 2005, 2009), and more recently the World Bank (2003, 2011), became very active in stating their concerns, framing the issues and solutions, and promoting participation in data collection (benchmarking and indicators) exercises. The important issue for the comparative researcher is to find out what might explain this sudden, close, scrutiny, and to determine if, at all, whether and how this has altered teacher policy and practices in national settings. A critical theorist is also likely to consider what this shift means for teachers. Does it place new limits on teachers as workers regarding control over their labour? Or does it open up possibilities for new forms of professionalism and engagement? Does the presence, and agenda, of the World Bank and the OECD set in train a rather different set of dynamics around teacher policy. And if so how, and with what outcomes for teachers?

As we have shown elsewhere (see Robertson, 2012, 2013), the OECD and the World Bank, have entered into the teacher policy space – legitimating their presence by arguing teachers and teaching matter to pupil performance, and pupil performance matters to developing globally competitive economies. This line of argument has been given weight by other global actors who have become prominent in the education policy field, including the global education firm Pearson Education, the global consulting firm McKinsey and Co., (Barber and Mourshed, 2007; Mourshed et al. 2010), and foundations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Paradoxically this global conversation has not involved teachers in any significant way, though it should have via their global union, Education International. Instead, the OECD seems to have acquired quite a strong voice in framing the nature of the problem and its solution, and is currently attempting to speak directly to teachers through its specially designed toolkit for teachers. Now, rather than a conversation that teachers might have with their sub/national unions and sub/national Ministries of Education based on respecting their expertise and professional autonomy (as in earlier times), teachers are given a one-size-fits-all set of guidance notes to operationalise by the OECD (2014), whilst at the same time teachers are made acutely aware of the fact that they have also been given a ranking in a system of global comparative performance.

This short account - exploring how to compare a global education policy using time reveals the insights that can be had from using such a lens. Time, of course, is always linked to space – and actors are always located in time and space. By looking at global education in this way, we are able to appreciate that even in the post-World War II years there was a ‘thin’ global governance. From 2000 onwards we can see a ‘thickening’ of global governance in that the global actors now dominate the framing of teacher policy. Elsewhere we have developed this analysis more fully (see Robertson, 2012,

2013). For this purpose here – it is sufficient to point to the ways in which we are able to see shifts in what scales (local, national, global) have become more powerful in determining what kinds of education policies, and to offer robust and reflective explanations.

*Methodological Reflection 2: The value of comparing spatial recalibrations – rescaling education policymaking*

We argued earlier space matters in education policy analysis (Robertson, 2010). We also pointed out that it matters in that it focuses attention on what kind of spaces we are comparing, and how also how space itself is being strategically to advance education policy. Put a different way, the comparative researcher is being asked to compare the difference that space makes – in this case the global – in advancing, or not, a particular set of education policies.

At this point it is helpful to introduce the idea of scale; a spatial term which refers to a level at which particular kinds of institutions and actors concentrate – and from there seek to organise or govern social, political and economic activities (Smith, 2000). In the previous reflection we argued that the global scale houses institutions who engage in framing and shaping education policy – but until recently their influence was fairly weak largely as these institutions lacked authority and legitimacy. Education policy was regarded as the preserve of nation states. However from the 1980s onwards, major changes began to take place within and between nations – as a new political project – informed by neoliberal ideas – began to be rolled out in countries like the UK, USA, Chile, New Zealand, and Australia.

The globalising of neoliberalism has had major consequences for the form, scope, and purpose, of much education policy – as it was used to bring in what Peter Hall (1989) calls ‘third order’ changes. By third order he means a radical rupture in the ideational base that informs the what, who and how of policy projects. In this case, introducing neoliberalism into what were mostly Keynesian inspired social orders meant for: (i) setting policies to work on aligning education more closely with the economy; (ii) making education into a competitive services sector; (iii) introducing policies that aimed to encourage a more competitive entrepreneurial identity; and (iv) rewarding institutions for acting in more economically efficient ways (Dale and Robertson, 2013).

Bringing in a new social and economic order, however, is not straightforward. Previous ways of organising social life, and the norms that ensured these ways of life were reproduced, are thus

challenged and transformed into new practices with rather different logics, forms of reason and outcomes. In doing so, education spaces and their constitutive social relations, are also reworked in new ways.

One way to try to advance a new political project is to rescale (Robertson et al, 2002). By this we mean that actors might relocate their activities to a new scale, or cede some of their authority to this scale, so as to drive forward new political initiatives. In the 1980s and 90s, decentralisation or devolution policies became a favoured set of globalised education policies aimed at using the local scale to advance initiatives, such as school-based management or single line budgets, whilst holding onto power at the centre. In this case, local communities, schools and departments were asked to take on the responsibility for education policies aimed at generating competition and efficiencies, oversighting the work of teachers, aligning the school with the needs of local business, ensuring that the department acted as a competitive unit, and so on.

However policymaking capacity – or some element of sovereignty – was also moved above the nation-state, to the regional and the global, so as to advance particular projects with rather different interests. A good example here is the Bologna Process – an education policy that emerged in 1999 which has had a huge impact on reshaping the degree architecture of higher education sector in Europe, as well as bringing in a new competency approach to learning. The initial move to rescale came from the French Minister for Education, Claude Allegre – who was particularly frustrated with the difficulties of getting change in the French academy. With universities being turned to as a means of generating a competitive knowledge economy, dealing with ‘recalcitrant’ academics willing to take to the barracks is quite a challenge (Ravinet, 2005). In 1998, Allegre used the celebrations surrounding the 800 years since the establishment of the Sorbonne, to announce the launch of a European Higher Education Space. At this point, only four countries were part of this agreement – Italy, Germany, the UK and France. In 1999, the Sorbonne Declaration morphed into the Bologna Process – an agreement ratified by 29 European countries. Since signing, the Bologna Process has grown rapidly in membership and reach – with 47 members and others who declare themselves Bologna compliant.

There are many interesting angles that a comparative scholar might be interested in here with regard to this kind of regional space. How does one regional project – such as the European Higher Education Area, compare with other regional projects, where the capacity to govern higher education is being rescaled. The South East Asian Higher Education Area, and Mercosur in Latin America are interesting points of comparison here. We might also ask other questions. What is the relationship new between these new regional scalar projects and their capabilities, and institutional and national levels of

education governance? Who gets to operate on which scale, and what are the outcomes for these different actors of any differences? How is policymaking made in these new scalar projects where authority and legitimacy might be differently mobilised? Are all members of the supra-regional project treated the same, and if there are differences, how might we account for them? Are there convergences across these regional projects, and if so, through what mechanisms, and with what outcomes? And if there are differences and similarities what are the political, economic, cultural and technological reasons for this? In suggesting this array of questions, in our view any one of these would offer a fascinating exploration for the comparative scholar in bringing scalar processes into view and using space as an entry point into comparing the changing strategies, structures and social relations and arise from a particular kind of education policy.

*Methodological Reflection 3: The value of comparing governing logics – the OECD and its global indicators*

As we have noted earlier, ‘comparison’ can be used in a range of ways when looking at education policy. At its simplest and *least* useful, it entails looking at two different entities, for instance countries, and asking how they are different from each other. This can provide fascinating contrasts, but it tells us little if anything about the nature of those differences and what, if anything, we can learn from them. More recently and relevantly, considerable importance has been placed on what we have referred to as ‘competitive comparison’, using comparison to construct a ranking of particular entities across particular qualities (Robertson, 2012). The OECD’s Program of International Student Assessment (PISA) is the obvious example here (Meyer and Benevot, 2013). However, here again, the use of comparisons for ranking tells us little about the substance of the policies and practices that produced them; they cannot, for instance, identify the *reasons for* the differences of importance. One key explanation of this is that ‘simple’ comparison between practices does not enable us to recognise the different rationales for which they are carried out, or what we will refer to here as the ‘logics’ informing them.

The way we will do this is to consider the nature of the interventions into the education field made by the OECD over the past 60 years or so. We will point very briefly to the nature of the intervention and then to the logic(s) that seem to be informing it. We should also note that in seeking logics, we also have to consider the *purposes* of programmes, since the two are closely linked, though rarely explicitly so.

However, in doing this it is important to identify the OECD's main priorities for education. Very broadly, following Rizvi and Lingard's analysis of Papadopoulos' (1994) history of OECD work in education, we can distinguish three main periods; in the 1960s, the main emphasis was on the 'quality' of education; in the 1970s, equality of opportunities and democratising education, whilst in the 1980s the focus shifted to alignment with economic policy (and it is important to note that the term 'globalisation' is not mentioned in Papadopoulos' 1994 book). This brief history indicates which issues were of greatest concern to OECD members (and it is important to note that the OECD's agenda is formally determined by its members, whose voting strength tends to be related to the size of their contribution, with USA and Japan contributing over half of the total funding).

One of the first OECD programmes that concerned education was manpower forecasting. This arose in the context of post-war recovery, and its logic was based on an assumed link between the level of qualified manpower and economic growth. This was underpinned by a pervasive attachment to the logic of 'human capital formation', based on the inference that labour could be treated as a form of capital, and that its output could be enhanced through education.

A second logic deployed by the OECD can be found in the method of peer review that became quite prominent in the 1970s. This was based on a logic of 'lesson learning' from one's peers (countries). Reviews of national systems were carried out by experts from other countries, and fed back to those in the reviewed countries, with the idea that they would point to practices elsewhere that might be usefully adopted.

More recently – and following the creation of a separate Directorate for Education in 2002 – logics have tended to go into three, related, directions. The first was an 'ideological vocabulary of reform', which followed the success of neoliberal politics in USA and UK in particular. This set of reforms emphasised, one, the need to limit government intervention and to base governance on what was known as New Public Management (which essentially meant that states should be governed as far as possible on the basis of market principles); two, use of growing technical expertise in monitoring (taking the place of the earlier logic of peer review); and three, quantification in shaping education policy via the Indicators of Education Systems (INES) project (see Bottani, 1996). It is interesting to note that these might be seen in different ways as key elements that came together to form PISA. They represent a common logic of suspicion of 'politics', on the one hand, and the need to provide accurate information for the organisation of not just the economy, but also the whole field of public administration, on the other.

It should be evident now that PISA did not appear from nowhere. Rather it emerged on ground

already well prepared for it, through programmes such as INES. But it goes beyond them in a number of ways that are in turn based on distinctive logics. In a nutshell, what PISA provides is a tool for *evaluating education systems worldwide* by testing the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students. Its 2012 PISA results were drawn from round 510,000 students spread across 65 countries representing about 28 million 15-year-olds globally (OECD, 2012).

Most importantly, PISA rests on what might be called a ‘nominalist’ logic; that all entities *called* ‘national education systems’ must necessarily have sufficient in common for it to be possible to diagnose them with the same set of tools, and to offer advice based upon those findings. From a comparative policy perspective, the most basic flaw in the use of the PISA data arises directly from this, because, as we noted in the ‘critical comparison’ section above, the findings are themselves taken as sufficient explanations of national educational states of affairs; they constitute explanations rather than themselves requiring explanation, and this in itself shifts the focus away from their causes, and on to the consequences that are manufactured through the PISA instruments.

Three other significant features of the logics informing PISA may be discerned. First, it rests on a logic of (especially statistical) expertise, and education policy is no longer best served by deliberations between variously informed and interested parties. Second, it promises to provide an accurate account of the ‘health’ of education systems, and offers remedies that will be universally valuable—such as evaluation systems. And third, it paves the way for the logic of competitive comparison, across particular dimensions of education (Meyer and Benevot, 2013). It is this latter logic – which is particularly powerful in that it draws upon complex modalities of power – such as time horizons (improvement for the next round) being always visible and palpable, on emotions like shame or pride, and on the ways in which vertical space (above and below) are used as ordering devices – despite the fact that this differences are often very slight between rankings, or indeed that the entity being compared cannot really be properly compared (Shanghai as a proxy for China, compared to Australia, or indeed Brazil). In terms of critical comparison, then, what we are interested in comparing are the logics and how they work, and whether, how, by whom and with what outcomes for governing global education policy do these logics change over time.

## **5 Conclusions**

Comparison is, above all, about problematising, rather than taking for granted, and in this case problematising phenomena that we have come to call global education policies. As we have argued, through comparing things that are familiar to us with things with the same name in other places, we learn that there are different understandings of the same things in different places, at different times, with different origins and meanings. More briefly, comparing produces *the possibility* of difference, and it might be hoped, a desire to understand and explain those differences. So, a major issue for comparative approaches is to examine the relationships between nominally similar phenomena, and here, too, a critical comparative approach to global policies is valuable, not only in distinguishing meanings and uses, but in seeking to *explain* the likely causes of those differences. And if this second step may not always be possible, the recognition that the same names are given to different phenomena in itself helps us to problematise those phenomena, rather than take them for granted, or assume that they ‘must’ somehow be comparable.

Finally, we suggest that it is also very useful in thinking about global education policy to ask: who compares and for what purposes? Recognising Novoa and Yariv-Mashal’s (2003) excellent account of the possible purposes of comparison, which contrasts its use as a form of enquiry, it does require us to recognise that there are sides to be taken, and these have consequences for our analyses. These are important questions when considering ‘global’ education policies – and this is especially so the case when we recognise that a failure to problematize not only results in the status quo being taken for granted, but also as an acknowledged fact.

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