

PISA in the Greek daily Press: the social significations and the relationship between the Greek society and the global education policy field

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ABSTRACT

Literature has been discussing the influence of International Organisations (IOs) on education policies ever since globalisation became the regime of our times. In this regard, a global education policy field has emerged where IOs meet with nations on different levels. This project focuses on PISA, the OECD's programme of student assessment, and aims to explore the emergence and expression of the social imaginary significations that arise in the Greek daily Press regarding PISA. By looking at PISA-related press publications, this paper addresses the unequivocal power of Press and seeks to understand how Greek society positions itself within the global education policy field¹.

KEYWORDS

PISA, press, globalisation, education policy, social imaginary

RÉSUMÉ

Depuis que la mondialisation est devenue l'état qui régit les sociétés de notre temps, il existe une importante littérature concernant l'influence des Organisations Internationales (OI) sur les politiques de l'éducation nationales et locales. À cet égard, un nouveau champ a émergé concernant la globalisation de la politique de l'éducation où les organisations internationales s'imbriquent avec les nations sur différents niveaux. Le présent texte se focalise sur le programme d'évaluation des élèves de l'OCDE, le PISA, et vise à explorer la manifestation et l'expression des significations imaginaires sociales telles que surgissent par l'analyse de la presse quotidienne grecque consacrée sur le sujet « PISA ». L'analyse de la presse liée aux articles PISA, démontre la spécificité du pouvoir croissant qui exerce la presse sur la société grecque et tente d'appréhender comment la société grecque se positionne elle-même dans le champ de politique éducative globale.

MOTS-CLÉS

PISA, Presse, globalisation, politique éducative, imaginaire social

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Global policies in local settings: the actors and the discourse of educational governance

Globalisation tends to be a buzzword that dominates both the academic and non-academic discourse, in almost every setting, acting as a bridge between the global movements and the national initiatives. Yet, globalisation is not an absolute phenomenon. Instead it is a constant multifaceted interplay among a range of actors resulting in the emergence of multi-level and multi-scale changes. The question that we are addressing at this point is: How is globalisation being signified within the field of education policy? In broad terms, globalisation affects the practices and, consequently, the governance of education, as global policies and trends have the capacity to “interact with, interrupt or conflict with other policies in play in national and local settings, and with long-standing indigenous policy traditions, to produce particular versions or mediations of policy” (Ball, 2013, p. 35). Such “processes of translation and recontextualization” (Ball, 1998, p. 119) involve a great deal of complexity, which is attracting to us. The interaction and transaction between national and international agents, policies, agendas and practices create an overhaul in the traditional governance setting at the national level. Although national governments still retain “the ultimate authority to develop their own policies, the nature of this authority is no longer the same” (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 2). Neither are its subjects nor its objects. Over the years, a number of IOs have emerged taking over roles previously exercised by the national states. This has eased a shift in the power relations leading to the emergence and establishment of a European policy space in educational governance (see Lawn & Lingard, 2002), on the one hand, and a global education policy field (see Lingard & Rawolle, 2011), on the other hand. These spaces or fields tend to sustain and reinforce each other.

IOs influential role upon “shaping national debates and policies” (Martens & Balzer, 2004, p. 2) echoes their involvement in processes of policy borrowing and learning. Yet IOs do not impose decisions nor prescribe regulations (see Rinne, 2008). Rather they exert what Lundgren (2011) calls a “steering effect”. This paper focuses on OECD and its indirect influence on the Greek context in the field of education. Nevertheless, our interest is not in the official policy discourse. Instead it is in examining how the media, and more specifically the Press, act as a space where public opinion and public dialogue are not only shaped but also captured. We consider Greece to be one of these ‘modern democracies’ where public opinion holds a prevailing position. We, therefore, argue that political institutions in a state of deficit or crisisⁱⁱ ascribe a pivotal role to the public opinion, mediated by the mass media (Tsakiris, 2011), with regard to the social significations that underpin not only the process but also the product of the translation and recontextualization processes. In this regard, our interest is to showcase and discuss the social significations ascribed by a society to the PISA (also referred to here as ‘the Programme’), based on the analysis of the Greek press.

OECD and its education policy: what can we (not) learn about and from PISA?

Although OECD aims to provide a forum for governments to cooperateⁱⁱⁱ, scholars (Rinne, 2008, p. 667) tend usually to envision it as a “‘think tank’ of the rich nations of the world”. Education was not always on the top of the priorities list for the OECD. However, as Rinne (2008, p. 667) argues, the ‘knowledge-based economy’, on the one hand, and the “centrality of the production of human capital”, on the other hand, have both raised OECD’s interest in education.

Statistics and numbers, or as Lingard (2011) puts it “policy as numbers”, have become a crucial part of OECD’s approach allowing for it to acclaim that: “For more than 40 years, the OECD has been one of the world’s largest and most reliable sources of comparable statistical, economic and social data” (OECD, 2008, p. 8). Considering OECD’s emphasis on

data collection, Rinne (2008, p. 668) points out that these data “have achieved almost canonical status among the member countries and its authority is rarely called into question”. Hence, its branding as “global ‘benchmarker of standards’” (ibid.). OECD’s work in measurement and statistics is mainly but not exclusively identified by and through PISA, which is not only a “comparative project” but also and most importantly “a model for the governing of national school development in a global world” (Lundgren, 2011, p. 28). Bringing together the national and the global fields under its numerical, statistical and comparative rules, OECD through PISA affects decisively the policy agendas. Close to that, Grek and Ozga (2008, p. 2) argue that OECD, and more specifically PISA, generates “the most powerful and visible indicators” at a global level, “the results of which have major impacts on national policies”.

However, the emergence and establishment of the use of the statistical data within the education policy field has not been unchallenged. Criticism has been raised with regards to the instruments used by the OECD for the measurement of competences, as well as the absence of a solid theoretical framework, the disregard of the national settings and the limited validity and reliability of quantitative indicators (Mons, 2008). Doubts have been raised over the years with regards to the design, the content, the conduct of the Programme as well as the analysis and the interpretation of its results. There is an extensive body of literature dealing with concerns around PISA (see Goldstein, 2004; Prais, 2004; Rochex, 2006; Murphy, 2010; Zhao & Meyer, 2013) which, in fact, lies within the greater discussion around assessment as a political instrument (see Mons, 2008). Other aspects of the Programme that have attracted the interest of the academic community are also the interpretation of the results and students’ performance (see Duru-Bellat, Mons & Suchaut, 2004; Duru-Bellat & Suchaut, 2005). In all these cases, PISA is approached as a primary source of research, whereas this paper is differentiated by its indirect approach of PISA through the daily Press. Scholars in Australia (Baroutsis & Lingard, 2017) and elsewhere in Europe (Hopfenbeck & Gorgen, 2017) have also looked into the press coverage of PISA.

A ‘disguised’ actor of education policy: press and the embedded social imaginary significations

This research was initially based on the remit that mass media and especially Press retain an unequivocal power. This power is illustrated by Van Dijk (1995, p. 10) as “symbolic and persuasive, in the sense that the media primarily have the potential to control to some extent the minds of readers or viewers, but not directly their actions”. Hence, media’s - or more accurately Press’s - depiction here as ‘disguised’. Embarking on this conceptualisation of media and Press, our aim is to explore the emergence and expression of the social imaginary significations looking into the PISA-related press publications.

Speaking roughly about media, Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes and Sasson (1992, p. 373) suggest that “a media system suitable for democracy ought to provide its readers with some coherent sense of the broader social forces that affect the conditions of their everyday lives”. Following a similar line of thought but enhancing the media’s political perspective, Tsakiris (2011) suggests that mass media, in fact, fill in the gap that is created by the deficit representation procedures of the political governing system. One can, therefore, understand the importance of the Press within a period of major social and financial crisis, such as the one Greece is currently going through, where the different communities and ensembles of people are under severe stress. Such a crisis emanates from the upper institutional and economical echelons and addresses all the different levels of their activity. Despite being financial at its roots, it penetrates in every aspect of the socio-political context. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that a great deal of the public debate takes place in the field of the Press during these times.

Considering that media develop a reciprocal relationship with the public opinion, shaping it and being shaped by it, our interest is set upon the social imaginary significations that a society produces, creates and formulates at a given socio-historical point in time. Admittedly, media seem to spur the production and/or emergence of images in people's minds. Gamson et al. (1992, p. 374) attribute a dual meaning to these images which "are, on the one hand, reproductions, but they have a second meaning as well: a mental picture of something not real or present". These images seem to be imprinted in people's minds and be connected with their previous or existing knowledge, shaping, as a corollary, their perception of the world. Van Dijk focusing on the press, argues that "... in order to understand the role of the news media and their 'messages', one needs to pay detailed attention to the structures and strategies of such discourses and to the ways these relate to institutional arrangements, on the one hand, and to the audience, on the other hand" (Van Dijk, 1995, p. 10).

Considering the highly influential role of the media and especially Press as well as its part as a mediator between the people and the political world, we are particularly interested in the embedded significations with regards to education and more precisely PISA. Developing their argument regarding the leverage following the publication of IEA and PISA/OECD studies, Novoa and Yariv-Mashal (2003, p. 425) seem to acknowledge that mass media discuss the results "in such a manner that reinforces a need for urgent decisions, following lines of action that seem undisputed and uncontested, largely due to the fact that they have been internationally asserted.". Furthermore, these social imaginary significations that we seek to trace can be loosely linked with the images that we discussed earlier. For the purposes of our study, we draw on Castoriadis (1987) and his concept of significations, which he defines as "not what individuals represent to themselves, consciously or unconsciously, or what they think. They are that by means of which and on the basis of which individuals are formed as social individuals, capable of participating in social doing and representing/saying, capable of representing, acting, thinking in a compatible, coherent, convergent manner..." (ibid, p. 366). We understand social imaginary significations to be more than social constructions, but also imaginary fabrications of a society, through which this society seeks to articulate images, intentions and representations in order to interpret a certain reality – the educational reality of participating in PISA, in this case. Consequently, considering the trend of international comparisons, we are interested in unravelling the role of the Press in the diffusion of educational outcomes via the social imaginary significations that it allows to emerge.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Research questions^{iv}

One of the main objectives of this research was to detect the social imaginary significations that emerge through the discourse that is engaged with PISA in the Press and its content, components and outcomes. We also sought to pinpoint the ways in which this social imaginary affects the agenda of the public debate.

Our study was, therefore, built around the following research questions:

1. Through which social imaginary significations does the Press adumbrate the relationship between the Greek education policy and the global education policy field?
2. Which social imaginary significations are attributed to PISA with regards to the aims of education and the pursued education policy?

3. What are the emerging social imaginary significations with regards to the Greek students and the Greek education system, as articulated in the Press, in the wake of PISA?

Data Collection and Sampling

For the purposes of this study we focused on the three most popular Greek newspapers: To Vima, Kathimerini and Eleutherotypia. We gathered all the publications that mentioned the words PISA and OECD at least once (105 in total, see table 1). The publications covered the period 2000-2011.

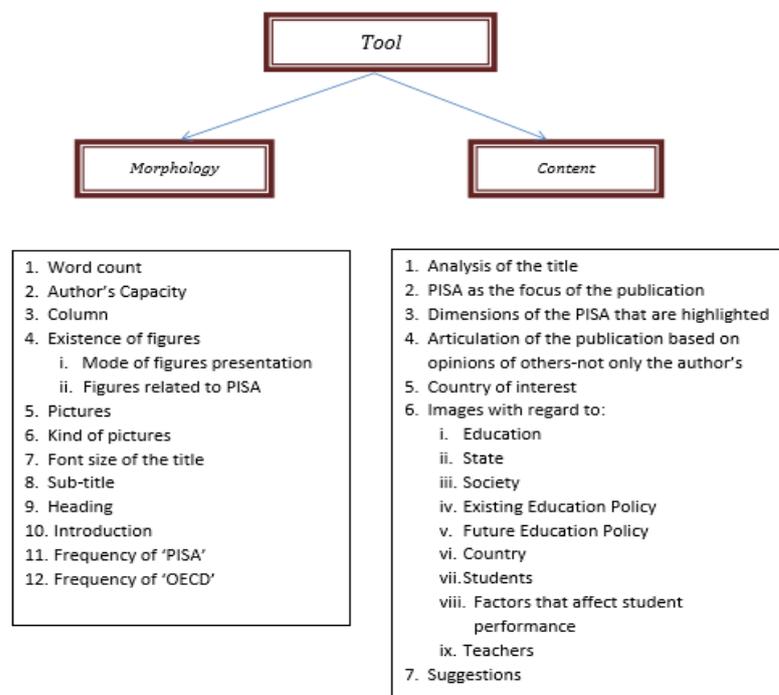
TABLE 1
Number of publications per newspaper

Newspapers	No. of publications
Kathimerini	56
To Vima	26
Eleutherotypia	23
Total	105

Data analysis

We studied the publications in terms of their morphology and their content. By bringing together the critical analysis of media discourse (Fairclough, 1995) with the content analysis (Robson, 2011), we created an analytical tool consisting of two axes: the morphological axis and the content axis. Each one of them comprises of different categories (some of those include sub-categories) that were used in the analysis of the press publications. The analytical tool is presented below (see figure).

FIGURE



Methodological tool

RESULTS

The analysis of the daily Press unveiled three main trends which are presented below^v.

Ambivalence towards PISA

TABLE 2
Dominant value per category of analysis (morphology and content)

Categories	Dominant value	Relative frequency
Dimension of PISA that is highlighted	Results	74%
Word count	<500 words	47%
Author's capacity	Journalist	53%
Is PISA the focus of the publication?	No	67%
Pictures	No	77%
If pictures appear	Focus on students	44%

The structure and the content of the publications manifest the ambivalence that dominates the Press towards PISA. Although the Programme is deemed important and an international testament to the current purposes of education, publications fail to provide a detailed description of it, therefore infiltrating public opinion with a partial view of it. As table 2 suggests, Press gives prominence to specific dimensions and aspects of the Programme, i.e. the results of the Programme and Greece's position in the league table. At the same time, when the publications are accompanied by pictures they almost exclusively depict students. Both these cases are an illustration of how "the mediated view of the world" is being constructed within and through the media and the way in which "the priorities of the media strongly influence the priorities of the public" (McCombs, 2002, p. 2). The emphasis on results and on students is also demonstrated by the titles of the articles.

"Low performance of Greek students" (To Vima, title, 05.12.2007, title)

"Poor performance of 15 year olds Greeks" (Kathimerini, 05.11.2009, title)

Lack of due diligence can also be inferred by the size of the publication which is relatively small, as well as the author's capacity who is often not an agent from the education policy field (see table 2). Also, according to data as shown in table above, there are few publications that exclusively report on PISA, whereas in most of the publications PISA results are used in support of other arguments. In addition, the majority of the PISA-related publications focus upon on Greece. This localises the Programme within the national setting. Yet, declarations about the other 'ideal' education systems that should be followed, such as the Finnish model, are not missing, as the titles below demonstrate:

"Finland - Greece: excellent - zero" (Kathimerini, 08.01.2008, title)

"The Finnish model suits Greece" (To Vima, 02.12.2006, title)

In light of the above, a sense of confusion and frustration seems to penetrate the Greek society as a whole. At a national and local level, education is a national priority demonstrated through the widely declared willingness to pursue academic excellence. However, international initiatives, like PISA, are welcomed with a sense of anxiety and are accepted, almost unequivocally, as sole indicators of what counts as 'excellent'. The Press tends to highlight the dimensions (e.g. students' performance and results) that could influence the readers emotionally and provide them with a limited understanding of what the Programme is, what

it stands for, and the educational principles the Programme is premised upon, i.e. the emphasis on measurable, quantifiable student performances. Education is being articulated in terms of international indicators and such indicators become the ‘lighthouse’ of excellence and performance.

The triad ‘State-country-society’ and the social imaginary that underpins it

Albeit the unanimous recognition of education as a foundational pillar for our society, tensions have emerged over the years among the State, the society and the people (either teachers or parents), regarding its content and its goals. Acting as a medium that captures public opinion at the time, the press publications that we studied are evident of such tensions. It is interesting to note in this case how PISA becomes the instigator of such tensions, therefore, confirming the workings of what Arnove (2013) calls the ‘dialectic’ between the global processes and the local settings.

TABLE 3

Dominant values per sub-category of analysis (content)

Category	Sub-Categories	Dominant value & relative frequency
Imaginary significations from the media discourse around	Education	Ineffective education 77%
	State	Taking initiatives 55%
	Society	High rates of unemployment 46%
	Existing education policy	Dysfunctions and weaknesses 35%
	Future education policy	Change of the Curriculum 34%
	Country	Subpar 86%

Analysing the results as they appear in table 3, it can be argued that the educational ideal that is articulated in the Greek daily Press seems to be underpinned by two inter-related themes. Firstly, a tension between the State and society is evident. There seems to be a consistent tendency from society, as articulated in the Press, to blame the State and its officers for the flaws of the educational and political context, as if the State is not part of this society, i.e. as if its officers were not democratically elected by the members of the society. The Press often empowers this view by highlighting the shortcomings of the Greek educational system, attributing those to lack of political will.

“Poor relatives in spending, too” (Eleutherotypia, 26.09.2005, title)

“Lagging behind in terms of spending on education” (To Vima, 13.09.2006, p. 15, title)

As shown in the table above and also as indicated by these titles of published articles, education is, therefore, deemed to be ineffective, suffering from low government funding and not providing students with the necessary skills and competencies. Although, at times, the State’s efforts (e.g. change of the national curriculum) to tackle some of these shortcomings are acknowledged in the publications (‘taking initiatives’ and ‘change of the curriculum’ in table 3), the ongoing criticism does not allow further support of such efforts.

The second theme pertains to the separation between the State and ‘our country’. In this case, a perception seems to be fostered in the sense that ‘our country’ lags behind compared to the other Programme participants. The State is held accountable for the insufficient training of the teaching staff as well as the outdated teaching methods being practiced and, therefore, the resulting low student performance. This divide between the State and ‘our country’ highlights once again the existing gap between the official policy discourse and the people (society), whom policies are meant to affect. Whilst suffering from high levels of unemployment, arguably a result of the ineffective educational system, the Greek society takes issue with the dysfunctions and weaknesses of the existing education policies. The divide between the State and ‘our country’ also sheds light to the competitive ethos that PISA entails, clearly manifested in the Press, where ‘our country’ is portrayed as weak and incompetent - ‘subpar’ as presented in table 3 - compared to others and especially those which top the league tables.

Emerging trends regarding Greek students’ performance and the school system

TABLE 4
Dominant values per sub-category of analysis (content)

Category	Sub-categories	Dominant values & relative frequency
Imaginary significations from the media discourse around	Students	Lack of critical thinking 46%
	Factors that affect students’ performance	School practices 38%
	Teachers	Need for training 46%
	Suggestions	Change of knowledge 36 %

Table 4 presents the images and ideas articulated in the PISA-related press publications with regards to the students and their performance, the teachers, while also including suggestions for the future, as they feature in the publications. According to the publications, lack of critical thinking and passive learning top the list of the chronic dysfunctions of the Greek educational system. It is argued that the structure and the content of the Greek system with its prescriptive academic orientation urges students to merely reproduce rather than actively engage with the learning process (see the title below). As a result, Greek students may have ‘rich’ and ‘deep’ knowledge on a breadth of topics, yet they do not appear to be highly competent to apply it in an everyday experience setting, like the one PISA claims to use in its tests.

“Memorization responsible for the OECD fiasco” (Kathimerini, 09.12.2001, title)

The reasons that account for this issue are various, and they once again stress the divide between the official policy and the society. School practices, i.e. the purely academic orientation of the curriculum, the low levels of financial support and the poor school infrastructure are amongst them. The studied press publications seem to have numerous suggestions on how the system can be improved and students’ performance may increase. These suggestions range from pure financial proposals, e.g. an increase in educational expenditure to proposals for teacher training, but most importantly the suggestions focus on the reorientation of the school curriculum. As argued in the publications, the nature of the school knowledge and the methods of teaching and learning should be ‘updated’, meaning to follow the global ‘what works’ declarations, for students to develop their skills and

competencies to be applicable in a 'real life' setting, similar to the one employed in PISA tests.

DISCUSSION

Reading through the Greek newspapers and the emergent imaginary with regard to PISA, this research project sought to trace the interplay between the global, national and the local education policy field. We are echoing Sassen (2008, p. 116) here who suggests that "it's really about going digging inside the national, inside the local, in order to add to our understanding of globalization". Acknowledging the ongoing shift in the dynamics of the national settings as a result of globalisation, our interest focused on the role of IOs, such as OECD, in education policy.

One can detect two immediate and inter-related political implications that stem from IOs' increasingly influential role. First of all, in the name of international comparisons and specifically in the context of education policy, flows of any kind (ideas, tools, etc) grow rapidly and contribute to the shaping of national agendas and public discourses. This echoes Rizvi (2008, p. 101) and the approach of "globalisation in terms of mobility", also known as policy transfer or policy learning or policy lessons. Secondly, we are envisaging what Lingard (2011, p. 356) calls the "rescaling of political authority" as well as the dominance of the "neo-liberal political frameworks". In light of that, IOs previously regarded as think tanks or subsidiaries, now seem to have earned their place in the policy setting scene whilst actively getting involved in shaping national frameworks.

Shifting away from the official discourse and being more interested in the way it is depicted in the daily Press, this project drew on Castoriadis' notion of 'social imaginary significations' in order to delineate how the Greek society positions itself within the global setting. Hence, our interest to bring to light the significations that are inscribed in the PISA-related press publications. The study of the Greek daily Press sheds light on the 'what' of press publications in order to unravel the 'how': we study 'what' the publications are arguing for in order to understand 'how' public opinion is being influenced and how education (policy) is conceived of in the public domain. The publications are promoting a partial view of the Programme, cultivating a results-driven educational rationale. At the same time, the society, the State and the nation/country appear to be the three different faces of the same entity, without them acknowledging that they are interconnected and interdependent. Aspirations and extrovert international perspectives are merged with national pursuits in multifarious ways and the students seem to be the 'bone of contention' between those who are self-introduced as adepts and policy-literates.

Regardless of the validity and accuracy of the arguments made in the Press about PISA and the Greek education system, one always needs to be vigilant of the fact that Press has the power to shape and direct public opinion. But it also has the power to create a platform where constructive public dialogue can take place. As McCombs (2002, p. 5) puts it, news media have the an "agenda-setting influence" capacity and this "is not limited to this initial step of focusing public attention on a particular topic. The media also influence the next step in the communication process, our understanding and perspective on the topics in the news."

It is in this amalgamation of roles and possibilities that the Press relies upon and expands its sphere of influence. An influence that rarely goes unnoticed but is usually left unchallenged.

NOTES

[i] The main points of this paper were expanded during the conference “PISA-Literacy-Vulnerable Social Groups” which took place on June 6th, 2015 in Athens (<http://pisanalysis.eap.gr/>). The present paper is written at a time when tensions prevail over the relations between Greece, on the one hand, and the global and European policy field on the other hand, particularly in view of looming discussions over Grexit.

[ii] At times when the State rolls back, other modes of governance (e.g. media) seem to emerge and claim almost ultimate power with regards to the production and dissemination of knowledge and information. An example of this case is the statement of the General Secretary of the Hellenic Communist Party who read the Third Economic Adjustment Programme for Greece via the German press Spiegel.

[iii] <http://www.oecd.org/about/> (Accessed: 15.04.2016)

[iv] The paper builds upon a dissertation pursued by Dimitra Pavlina Nikita under the supervision of Despina Tsakiris and submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of MA Educational Programs and Materials at the University of Peloponnese, Greece. The dissertation was looking at the social imaginary signification in the Greek daily Press with regard to PISA. For a detailed description of the data collection method, analysis and results, please refer to Nikita (2012).

[v] Categories are comprised of different values, but only the dominant value per category is presented in these tables. All values presented in the tables are rounded. Also, titles from the newspaper articles are presented as translated by the authors. The date of the publication is provided and the page number, if available.

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