

## **PISA: Multiple 'Truths' and Mediatized Global Governance.**

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### **Abstract**

The OECD's PISA programme has been portrayed as central to the emergence of a regime of global educational governance and the subsequent convergence of policies towards a standardised model. Whilst there is an extensive literature describing PISA's impact on education policies, there is a paucity of analysis of how PISA data is presented to the public within nations by three main actors which interpret the results; namely the OECD itself, politicians and the media. This study analyses how England's 2012 PISA results were interpreted by those actors, focusing particularly on the role of the media. We demonstrate that the OECD's original messages were significantly distorted by the UK Government and how the media, driven by its own logic, framed the results in terms of a narrative of decline, crisis and the need for urgent reform, while, significantly, giving little coverage to either the recommended policy actions or the contrasting interpretations of the PISA results by politicians and the OECD. We argue that a form of 'mediatized governance' shaped and limited the overall frame within which the results were debated and had a powerful influence on how local politicians represented the PISA results and advocated their own policy actions

### **Introduction**

Over the last thirty years international large scale student assessments (ILSAs) have exerted a powerful influence on educational policy making within nations. Low performance by a nation provides the basis for portraying the educational status quo as in crisis and requiring rapid and urgent reform; whilst high performing nations provide the models of 'best practice' and the source for identifying and transferring 'what works' as a form of evidence-based policy making. Most notably the PISA programme, run by the OECD, is increasingly accepted as an accurate proxy measure of educational quality across the globe and its comparisons have been used within nations to determine the need for educational reform, the nature of the problem and the 'best' solution. This policy making

process is framed within an overarching narrative which portrays future economic success as being dependent on improving educational quality; a claim which has its origins in human capital theory and which has been reinterpreted more recently by 'knowledge capital' theorists Hanushek and Woessmann (2015) who claim that improvements in economic growth are the result of rising PISA scores. Notwithstanding that those claims have been rejected (e.g. Kamens 2015, Komatsu and Rappleye, 2017) they have been extensively reproduced in the literature advocating educational reform within nations, and in OECD (and World Bank and Consultancy Reports) publications. In parallel an influential global network of followers has emerged around ILSAs comprising think tanks, edu-businesses, academics, and commercial consultancies which use PISA type data to advocate and implement policies designed to create 'world class' schools through the identification of 'best practices' (Auld and Morris 2014, 2016).

A number of authors ( Munch, 2014; Sellar and Lingard, 2013a, 2013b; Sjøberg, 2016) argue that ILSAs such as PISA have contributed to a convergence of education policies around the world and the emergence of a system of 'Global Governance'. This is characterized by: policy making processes that are not bounded by the nation state; the powerful role of multiple actors, especially the OECD, global consultancies and 'Edubusinesses' (Ball, 2012 ); the reliance on comparative data and statistics designed to provide measures of the quality of schooling in and across nations; and, an overall association with neoliberal policies that stress: privatization, competition, performance management and forms of accountability that involve 'steering at a distance'. The OECD specifically is portrayed as operating a form of soft governance as it has no formal mandate or legislative role within nations and numerous authors have sought to distinguish the types of governance from which it derives its influence. Thus Woodward (2009) outlines four overlapping dimensions of the OECD's role in global governance, namely, cognitive, normative, legal and palliative, and argues that it operates a form of soft power largely through cognitive and normative forms of governance. Sellar and Lingard (2013 b) draw on and extend Woodward's typology; they argue that the OECD's influence derives from 'infrastructural governance', a product of the international networks and systems it has established to collect and compare statistical data in

education, and 'epistemological governance', which reflects its well-established capacity to shape the views of key actors in education across local, national and global scales. Mahon and McBride (2009) demonstrate that all branches of the OECD promote a neoliberal agenda and argue that it has pioneered the use of what they term 'inquisitive' and 'meditative' forms of transnational governance. Inquisitive governance involves the surveillance or monitoring of the actions of states through peer review practices that involve auditing, comparison, and ranking.

Meditative governance involves discussions among experts about what are the 'best practices' that can be inferred from the inquisition. PISA's effectiveness as a source of governance is commonly attributed to three factors: its acceptance as a universal measure of education quality; its perceived economic significance; and, the promise of policy solutions in the form of prescriptions of 'best practices'. Notwithstanding the diversity of the labels applied to the OECD's mode of governance, they share a focus on explaining the direct impact of that organisation on national education policies.

There is an extensive literature which critiques the validity of the tests and analyses how the data from cross national tests are portrayed as providing objective/scientific evidence and a non-ideological basis for policy making (Halpin and Troyna 1995; You et al 2016). In practice they are often selectively interpreted and used by policy makers to project their own ideological agendas (Morris, 2012). In contrast, although some authors have looked at media coverage of both international and internal public examinations (Yemini and Gordon, 2015; Warmington et al 2004, Waldow, Takayama and Sung, 2014) and other cross-national studies (Yakasawa et al, 2017), there is, as Baroutsis and Lingard (2016) note, relatively little analysis of the congruence between the messages of the OECD, political actors and the media, and specifically, of the role of the media in educational governance through PISA. This omission is surprising given that the OECD's Education Director describes the media as the primary means through which the OECD seeks to influence national educational policies:

'I realised this is really the wrong strategy...going top down, going to the people in charge isn't going to change the system. And I actually changed strategy and thought I'm going to go to work with the media, go to work with other people, and that has created a public demand for better education...parents knocked on the door of schools, schools knocked on the door of local administrators – and a week after this the Chancellor in Germany went public about this, saying what they needed to do...' (Schleicher, 2015).

While the role of the media in disseminating the PISA story has been recognised, this role has tended to be portrayed as either that of a vehicle which simply reports and reinforces the messages generated by others; or as having been consciously manipulated by other actors to promote their preferred messages. Baroutsis suggests that 'their [media] role is that of policy reinforcement rather than policy construction or contestation' (2015, p.1) and Addey et al (2017) illustrate how the OECD has invested significant resources in developing its media activities and relationships as it shifted over time to engage in policy advocacy. They conclude:

'...we must acknowledge the enhanced policy actor role that the OECD has taken and the role of 'media management' in seeking to enhance the impact of PISA.' (p.15).

However, it is also necessary to recognise that in democratic societies the media does not only represent and reproduce the views of others; it operates by its own rules and logic that influences other actors, especially, in the case of PISA, politicians and the OECD. This synergic relationship was recognised in 1979 by Altheide and Snow who observed that 'political life is clearly being recast to fit the demands of major media' (p. 136.). Similarly, and more recently, Hattam et al (2009) comment that the 'media has an increasingly constitutive role in the education policy process'. The initial publication and interpretation of the PISA results by the OECD itself is filtered and retransmitted through the different lenses of both the local media and local political actors. Similarly, the interpretations of the PISA data by politicians are primarily filtered and transmitted into the public domain through the media. It is around this mediated material that policy discussions tend to focus and it is therefore necessary to understand the logic which underlies how the media interpret and represent the PISA results and how this influences politicians at the local level.

This article analyses, with reference to England, the nature of, and relationship between, the messages transmitted by the three policy actors - the OECD, politicians and media- which provide an instant input into the public domain when, and immediately after, the results are released and set the parameters of the 'policy talk' (Tyack, 1991) within nations. The PISA results are published triennially by the OECD and we focus on the PISA 2012 results that were released in December 2013 by looking first at the materials which the OECD itself made public, then at the statement to Parliament in which the Education Minister announced a series of reform initiatives based on those results, and finally at the response of the print and broadcast media (including online formats) to those events.

We argue that the release of the PISA data was subject to a variation of what has become known as the 'Rashomon effect', after the 1950 Japanese film, whereby a single event, in this case the publication of a body of data, is contested, ambiguous and subject to multiple interpretations by individuals or groups with different motivations. This emphasis on the subjectivity of truth and the uncertainty of factual accuracy is demonstrated below and challenges the prevailing discourse, which stresses the objective, rational and scientific nature of 'PISA based policy making'.

Secondly, we argue that the role of the media and that of politicians in England have become powerfully intertwined as the media exerts a distinctive, direct influence on the way politicians represent PISA to the public.

### **Media Logic and the Role of PISA**

'Media logic' seeks to explain the implicit principles by which the media operate. Three concepts are central to understanding how PISA is represented by the media in democratic societies such as England: framing theory, news values and mediatisation. Framing theory is central to media logic: it focuses on how meaning can be constructed and interpreted and opinion manipulated by framing narratives in different ways (Goffman, 1974; Entman, 1993; and, 2007; Weaver, 2007).

Frames, which are akin to the multiple interpretations central to the 'Rashomon effect', explain the selectivity of the media in terms not only of *what* is reported, but more importantly, *how* it is

reported, what is emphasised and what is omitted –frames ‘diagnose, evaluate and prescribe’ (Entman,1993, p. 52). Various authors (Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000; De Vreese, 2005;) have suggested that five frames dominate news coverage: attribution of responsibility, conflict, human interest, economic consequences and morality. All but the last seem to be important in the framing of PISA as a news story and help to explain why it makes headlines and is covered extensively. Baroutsis and Lingard (2016) use framing theory to analyse the media coverage of the PISA results in Australia and identify three frames; namely: counts and comparisons, criticisms, and contextual considerations. Most coverage in their analysis uses the first frame.

The concept of ‘news values’ seeks to explain how journalists and editors decide what is ‘newsworthy’. The factors which determine that decision were defined by Galtung and Ruge in their seminal study of 1965, and more recently reviewed by Harcup and O’Neill (2010). Relevant to PISA are stories about the power elite; surprise; bad news; good news; relevance (to current political agendas) and follow up (of previous stories). Galtung and Ruge suggest that a social trend taking place over a long period of time is unlikely to be selected as news. Thus, while PISA has successfully become ‘news’ over an extended period, this has required the reframing of some of its key features to make them appeal to journalists. The reductive tendency of media to ‘shrink, condense and select/reject aspects of intricate social relations in order to represent them as fixed, natural, obvious and ready to consume’ (Ndlela, 2005, p.73) can, we argue, be clearly seen in the presentation of the complex messages of PISA for media consumption, and especially for sensational headlines. The centrality of news headlines (as opposed to the stories which follow them) in opinion formation, or ‘media-generated shortcuts’ (Andrew, 2007, p. 24) whereby stories look ‘considerably different through the prism of newspaper headlines compared to the lens of the full story’ (ibid., p. 36) has been noted in the context of education by Alexander,

‘...it’s the headlines that set the tone and do the damage. It’s the headlines that sell newspapers. And it’s to the headlines that politicians feel obliged to respond’ (2010, p.6)

The final concept relevant to this study is that of mediatisation – a relatively new area of study which has its roots in Altheide and Snow’s observation cited above. Esser and Strömback describe

mediatisation as a 'meta-process on a par with other transformative social change processes such as globalisation' (2014, p.4), in which 'political communicators are forced to respond to media rules, aims, production logics and constraints' (Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999). We employ Esser and Strömbach's (2014) definition of mediatisation which they distinguish from the related concept of 'mediation'. They describe the latter as a static and neutral act of transmission whilst mediatisation is an inherently dynamic and process-oriented concept that cannot be reduced to the transmission of message or communication through the media. While some commentators view mediatisation as 'bad news for democracy' (Blumler, 2014), there is a general acknowledgment that the media play an increasingly dominant role in public life, and that their influence on policy is increasing. Allied to this is the idea of 'media capital', by which the fortunes of public figures, including politicians, are linked strongly to their 'ability to generate a positive public profile through the mass media' (Davis and Seymour, 2010, p. 739). Politicians may accrue one or both of two forms of this social capital, namely 'institutionalized media capital', which is associated with a person's position within an organisation or society, and 'individualised media capital', which is associated with personal qualities like charisma and communications skills. The concept of media capital helps to explain the strong interrelationship between the media and the Secretary of State for Education in England in 2012; which we discuss below in more detail.

### **England: A Fertile Ground for PISA**

Schooling in England has long been subject to ongoing reforms but for the last twenty years it has been strongly influenced by cross national comparisons (Breakspear 2012;). This was acknowledged by Michael Gove, then Education Secretary, speaking to the World Education Forum in January 2011, almost two years before the release of the 2012 results.

'Yesterday, you heard from a man I recently have described as the most important man in the British education system - but he could equally be the most important man in world education. ...in truth Andreas (Schleicher) is the father of more revolutions than any German since Karl Marx. Because Andreas is responsible for the PISA league tables of international educational achievement. He tells us which nations have the best-performing

education systems and then analyses that data to determine why that is the case.’ (Gove, 2011).

Almost two years later, Elizabeth Truss, then Education Minister, talked in similarly evangelical terms, mooted the possibility of individual regions of England entering PISA as separate entities, with the allure of ‘more than twice as many schools as present taking part in the tests’ (December 2012). PISA is regularly referred to in the English media, it has provided the basis for a series of TV documentaries comparing local schools with those in East Asia (‘Are our kids tough enough: Chinese School’; three part documentary series broadcast in September 2015) and informs a number of scholarly and consultancy reports (Auld and Morris 2014).

Four factors help to explain why England provides such a ‘favourable ecology’ (Carvalho 2014) for PISA to exert a powerful influence on educational governance: the political appetite for serial educational reform (Chitty, 2009; Glatter, 2012,); the longstanding prevalence of a testing, inspection and ‘league table’ culture, not only in education (Ozga, 2009; Gordon and Whitty, 1997), but in all aspects of public life; the tendency of the media to report ‘failures’ of all public services in terms of a crisis and to ‘name, blame and shame’ those seen to be responsible for poor service; and the creeping hegemony of portrayals of education as a ‘global race’ between nations as they compete in the global ‘Knowledge Economy’ (Truss, 2014; Cameron and Clegg, 2010; Gove, 2013).

The fourth factor - that of the ‘global education race’ - is relatively recent and is associated with the looming spectre of losing the all-important race to out-perform other nations. Central to that discourse is the claim that nations that fail to demonstrate the appropriate, measurable skills, will be ‘left behind’ while their economic competitors snatch opportunities from them. The rhetoric of global competition expressed through education and the imperative of improving educational attainment in order to succeed economically has been central to the aspirations of all the major political parties (e.g. Blunkett 1997). By 2010 it had come to express the overriding and overt aim of education. Elizabeth Truss, a former Conservative Education Minister, illustrates the logic:



‘The pace of the race is such that...we must [also] learn from others and fast...we are perfectly capable of moving from a middling position in the rankings to a world beater’ (Truss 2012).

In comparative terms, while the impact of PISA in some other nations has been profound, for example Germany in 2001 and Sweden in 2013, the policy reaction was precipitated by unexpectedly poor results, which was not the case in England. Germany, in what is now known as the PISA *Schock*, employed a committee (the Klieme committee) of academics and pedagogues to draft a series of unprecedented federal-level reforms aimed at addressing the inequalities which had become manifest in PISA 2000 and the German internal PISA report (2002) which compared results between regions and school types. In Sweden, following the 2012 results, which saw the country showing the biggest fall of any participating country in the preceding three years since the previous PISA round, the OECD was commissioned to undertake an in-depth investigation into the failures and to make policy recommendations. So, while some other nations have at times reacted to PISA with alarm and significant reform, the response to PISA 2012 in England exemplified two salient differences. Firstly, England had not suffered a ‘PISA catastrophe’ – its results had stayed largely unchanged over the 12 years of the tests; and secondly, no other country had reacted so swiftly and directly with a series of reform proposals on the very day the results were released.

England thus provides a receptive environment within which PISA data can operate as a source of governance since PISA’s inception in 2000; but, as we demonstrate below, the features of the messages which are transmitted within this environment do not provide a straightforward or direct transfer of ideas from the OECD to the policymaking process.

Our analysis below follows the chronology in which the interpretations were made public; beginning with a description of the PISA 2012 results as they were released to English audiences by the OECD; moving then to an analysis of the statement to Parliament made by the English Secretary of State for Education on the same day, 3 December 2013, and reproduced in Hansard (2013). The OECD perspective is provided by: (a) the United Kingdom ‘Key Findings’ Country Note (OECD

2013 a); (b) the main 2012 PISA report 'PISA in Focus' (OECD 2013b); (c) the second volume commentary on the PISA results 'PISA 2012 Results: Excellence through Equity' (OECD 2013c), released simultaneously with (b); and (d) the slides used by Schleicher in his speech when the international PISA results were announced. Finally, we focus on the media coverage by the mainstream tabloid and broadsheet publications (online and print versions), as well as the BBC and other broadcast news outlets in the period immediately after the release of the results. Using narrative and discourse analysis techniques, we look at the messages reproduced in the media and attempt to determine which aspects of both the OECD data and the politicians' interpretations of it are reflected in media coverage. We do not analyse: the quantity of media coverage; reporting within social media; the questionable validity of the OECD's own policy recommendations (Sjøberg 2016; Morris 2016;); the interpretations of the data by the consultancy industry or academics; nor do we explore the increasingly powerful role of those who own the print media in England (especially Rupert Murdoch) to promote their own agendas.

### **The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.**

In contrast with much of the other PISA material, the UK Country Note issued by the OECD detailing the PISA results is, along with the 'notes' on all participating nations, designed to describe the results of the 2012 tests with little or no discussion of their implications. For example, the 'Key Findings' section begins:

'The UK performs around the average in mathematics and reading and above average in science, compared with the 34 OECD countries that participated in the 2012 PISA assessment of 15-year-olds'.

Subsequently the results are set in a comparative context; with no hint of policy advocacy or recommendation:

'In the UK, only 6% of PISA students have a very low score on the PISA index of socio-economic background while on average, across OECD countries this proportion is 15%'.

The country note, which is given to journalists ahead of the press announcement on 'PISA Day', contains reference information needed to write an article on the material: the UK position and how it has changed, its position relative to others, a few key points (in this case about girls' attitudes to Mathematics, for example). However, many of the subsequent interpretations, by politicians and the media, largely ignore the subtleties of this document, and more reference is made to the presentation given by Schleicher, the OECD Education Director, as well as to the statement given by the Secretary of State to Parliament.

The official international release of the overall PISA results was carried out at a press conference in London which was managed by the OECD and its partner organisations, and seemed focused on the needs of journalists. Following this, Schleicher undertook a series of talks and press conferences in a variety of countries. He writes his own slides and for the 2012 release took 147 of them to the venues at which he spoke immediately following the launch. The material used in Schleicher's slides is of two types: the first primarily uses graphs to compare the results of the 65 participating countries across a very wide range of variables; including the performance of immigrant children across the nations to gender differences in science attainment. The second type seems designed to provide journalists with ready-made 'sound bites', for example: 'the dream of social mobility; in some countries is close to reality' and 'It's not just about poor kids in poor neighbourhoods; but about many kids in many neighbourhoods'.

The 'PISA in Focus' (PIF) materials analyse the overall results across the nations and are designed and written in 'media-friendly' format. In contrast to the country note, the tone of the main PIF document, released on the same day, is strongly interpretive, offering clear policy guidance ('what this means for policy and practice') after the 'what the data tell us' section. The material is presented in colour format, with photographs, pictures and charts breaking up brief, punchy sections of text. The main generic themes which are identified and promoted from the 2012 results are summarised in a PowerPoint slide which is reproduced as Fig.1 below; this distinguishes between a 'modern enabling system' and 'old bureaucratic systems' and promotes the former. The

features of both these systems are distinguished across five operational dimensions: student inclusion; curriculum, instruction and assessment; teacher quality; work organisation and accountability.

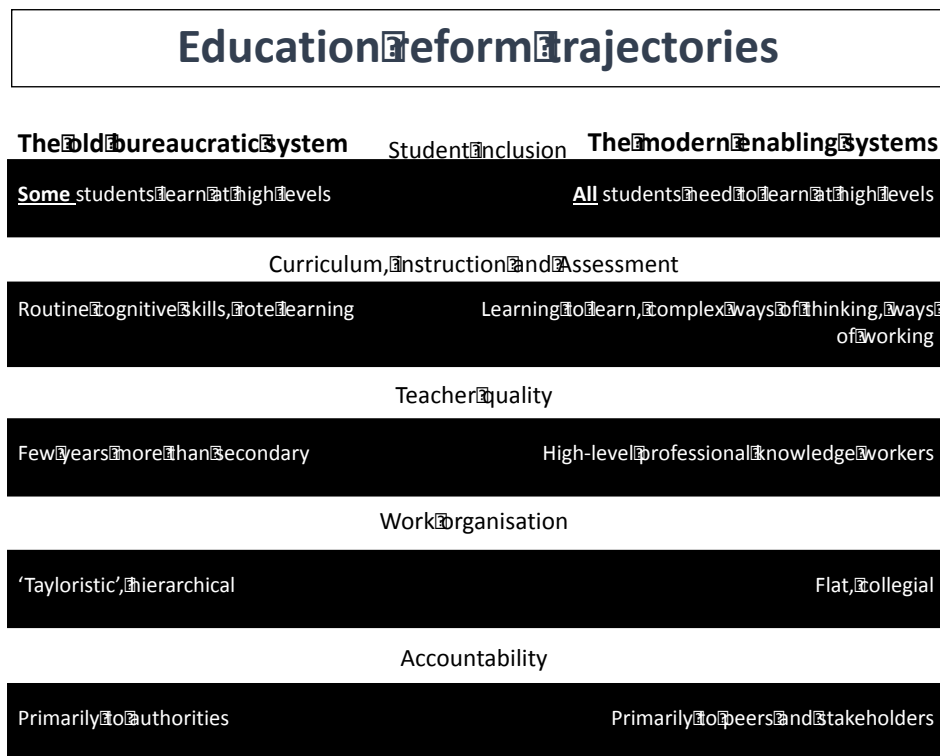


Figure 1 – slide comparing ‘old bureaucratic’ and ‘modern enabling’ education systems from OECD education director’s PISA results presentation (in the actual presentation the colours are coded left to right red-amber-green).

Whilst the Country Note seemed designed to give journalists a skeleton structure for initial articles; the slide show and the PIF report provided greater detail and policy recommendations for the more specialised reader.

### Gove’s Statement to Parliament

On 3 December 2013, Michael Gove, the then Secretary of State (Minister) for Education, gave a statement to the UK Parliament about the 2012 PISA results (Gove, 2013) which had been made public earlier that day. This speech drew extensively on selected aspects of the PIF materials, which described the more generic findings, observations and recommendations of the OECD,

rather than the England Country Report. He initially praised the ‘hard work, dedication and idealism’ of teachers, but quickly pointed out that ‘sadly’, England’s performance on the league tables showed that the quality of teachers was ‘not enough’.

Using the language of crisis and failure, he spoke of a decline in performance, of England being overtaken by competitors, and of a bleak future for children if things did not change:

‘When people ask why—if teachers are better than ever— we need to press ahead with further reform to the system, today’s results make the case more eloquently than any number of speeches. Since the 1990s, our performance in these league tables has been, at best, stagnant, and, at worst, declining.’

This misleading claim was phrased and framed in a manner readily convertible to media headlines and, predictably, formed the basis of the extensive and immediate press coverage the next day concerning the PISA story. The UK results for PISA 2000 (the first exercise) and 2003 were declared invalid because of sampling issues; thus, the baseline for measurement should not begin until 2006. In fact, England’s position stayed almost the same, despite an increase in the number of participating countries. This was the official statement on the matter from the OECD UK Country note:

‘England’s performance in mathematics, science and reading has remained stable since PISA 2006. In each survey, pupils in England have performed similarly to the OECD average in mathematics and reading and significantly better than the OECD average in science.  
(OECD, 2013a, p.11)

Michael Gove went on to assert that ‘we are still falling further behind the best-performing school systems in the world’, whose children are ‘learning more and performing better with every year that passes, leaving our children behind in the global race’.

He then outlined what he viewed as the common features of high-performing and fast-improving education systems, and the ways in which these could be transferred to improve England’s

performance. His commentary had a very weak connection to the five themes identified by the OECD summarised in Fig 1 above. He asserted that there were five 'pillars' of educational success which characterised high performers and upon which he intended to base reforms in England. These were:

- 1) an emphasis on social justice and helping every child to succeed;
- 2) a commitment to an aspirational academic curriculum for all students;
- 3) a high level of autonomy from bureaucracy for head teachers;
- 4) a rigorous system of accountability for performance;
- 5) head teachers having the critical power to hire whom they want, remove underperformers and reward the best with the recognition they deserve.

We now focus on each of these 'pillars' and compare what the OECD PISA messages state, what Gove's reforms proposed; and the omissions or additions on either side.

#### *An Emphasis on Social Justice and Helping Every Child to Succeed*

This message featured prominently in the main report and was stressed by Schleicher in his talks. The UK country report stated that 'equity in education outcomes is at the OECD average' (p.4), which in Gove's statement became 'The good news from the PISA research is that in England we have one of the most progressive and socially just systems of education funding in the world'. The PIF report included a large section on Performance and Equity and good practice was highlighted in Germany, Finland and Israel. The report OECD (2013) asserts:

'... some education systems tend to separate students either across classes or schools. Evidence from PISA shows that school systems that segregate students according to their performance tend to be those where students are also segregated by socio-economic status and by the frequency of their exposure to formal mathematics.' (p. 14).

The slide which Schleicher used states:

‘Stratification in school systems (e.g. grade repetition and selecting students at a young age for different “tracks” or types of schools) is negatively related to equity; and students in highly stratified systems tend to be less motivated than those in less-stratified systems.’ (slide 86)

Whilst Gove highlighted the OECD’s social justice agenda, he avoided reference to these findings or to the OECD’s negative portrayal of segregating children by ability. The policies Gove subsequently proposes focus on funding and accountability, which ignored both the PISA recommendations and the stratification which is endemic in the English system:

“That is why we have made funding even more progressive with the pupil premium. We have extended free pre-school education to the most disadvantaged two-year-olds and changed how we hold schools accountable so they have to give even greater attention to the performance of poor children.” (Gove, 2013)

He stopped short of mentioning, let alone proposing action on, the OECD observation that:

‘Some countries have introduced system-wide reforms that are aimed at moving towards more comprehensive schooling (Poland) or less tracking (Germany). These reforms simultaneously address various sources of inequity, such as socio-economic disadvantage, an immigrant background, or a challenging family structure.’ (OECD 2013c, p.109.)

In 2017, the Conservative government committed itself to opening new grammar schools, which select by ability, and to trialling a new OECD test (IELTS) for 4-5 year olds.

*A commitment to an aspirational academic curriculum for all students* As shown in Fig.1 above, the curriculum also featured in Schleicher’s overview of the findings. He described ‘routine cognitive skills and rote learning’ as belonging to ‘the old bureaucratic system’, while ‘learning to learn, complex ways of thinking, ways of working’ were features of the ‘the modern enabling system’. This distinction was avoided by Michael Gove who had previously promoted styles of teaching associated with the ‘old bureaucratic system’ (Adamson et al 2017). The PISA report did not

specifically refer to its content being 'aspirational'; the emphasis was on equality of opportunity. He expanded the term by giving lengthy details of his intention to model a new 'stretching' Maths curriculum on that of 'successful Asian nations', and introduce a core academic curriculum like that of the 'fastest-improving European nation, Poland', subsequently operationalised in the 'English Baccalaureate' consisting of five GCSE passes in core subjects. Another key policy initiative, further testing of children, was also proposed:

'In our drive to eliminate illiteracy, we have introduced a screening check at age six to make sure that every child is reading fluently.'

Nowhere does the OECD suggest that the testing of children improves attainment.

#### *A high level of autonomy for head teachers*

The quest for structural changes which promote greater autonomy has driven educational reforms in England since the 1990s and this is what Gove focussed on; it is also the area showing the biggest disparity with the OECD report. As You (2015) reports, autonomy takes diverse forms, and financial autonomy differs from autonomy of curriculum or governance. Whilst the OECD considers autonomy to be a key factor in school success, the PISA reports do not support the nature of the autonomy he promoted. PISA 2012 in Focus made just one reference to autonomy, which was mirrored by the reference in Schleicher's slides:

'Schools with more autonomy over curricula and assessments tend to perform better than schools with less autonomy when they are part of school systems with more accountability arrangements and/or greater teacher-principal collaboration in school management.' (OECD (2013b, p.24).

Gove elaborated at length, but he was referring to a very specific type of autonomy:

'The third reform imperative is greater autonomy for head teachers. There is a direct correlation in the league tables between freedom for heads and improved results.'



He posited a connection between 'league table results' and this 'freedom' of head teachers, which is absent from the OECD analysis. He elaborated

'That is why we have dramatically increased the number of academies and free schools, and given heads more control over teacher training, continuous professional development and the improvement of underperforming schools.'

He expanded on the virtues of the academies programme, and the Schools Direct initiative, both of which devolve largely financial and recruitment powers to head teachers.

#### *A rigorous system of accountability for performance*

Michael Gove reported that systems without accountability 'often underperform', and then went on to explain that this:

'...is why we have sharpened OFSTED [the system for evaluating schools] inspections, recruited more outstanding serving teachers to inspect schools and demanded that underperforming schools improve far faster.'

There was no mention of school inspection in the OECD report, which favours self-regulation among groups of teachers rather than punitive accountability from external bodies. Words like 'demanded', 'sharpened' and 'underperforming' do not align with Schleicher's priorities, summarised in Fig 1, which associated accountability by 'authorities' with the 'old bureaucratic system', suggesting that more effective school improvement is associated with 'flat, collegial' styles of management and accountability to peers and stakeholders'. He continued his speech 'demanding greater rigour and higher standards from all schools', something he claimed would be easier to measure through new league tables which would 'ensure that every child's progress is rewarded'. There was no suggestion from the OECD that in-country league tables would raise standards; notwithstanding the irony that PISA is the most extensive educational league table.

*Head teachers have the critical power to hire whom they want, remove underperformers and reward the best with the recognition they deserve*

Michael Gove's fifth pillar of reform was closely related to his third, and went on explicitly to link this 'critical power' of Head Teachers with performance-related pay:

'Shanghai, the world's best-performing education system, has a rigorous system of performance-related pay. We have given head teachers the same freedoms here.'

Teacher pay has been linked to performance in England since 1998, when teachers were first encouraged to apply for 'Advanced Skills teacher' or 'Excellent Teacher' status, both of which offer financial rewards. Several reports have explored the feasibility of introducing Performance Related Pay (PRP) for teachers, including a review (Chamberlin et al, 2002), which concluded that there was insufficient evidence to proceed. Coupled with ongoing opposition from teaching unions, the idea of PRP lay dormant, but it was given a new lease of life by the discovery that Shanghai operates a PRP scheme. The English initiative came in the form of an English Department for Education (DfE) 'advice notice' in April 2013, seven months before the PISA results were released, in which head teachers were informed that from September they would have the 'freedom' to pay good teachers more. The only 'evidence' provided was the claim that 'evidence shows that improving the quality of teaching is essential to raising standards in schools' (DfE, 2013). The PISA results were then presented *post facto* in Gove's speech as providing additional 'evidence' to add weight to a policy that was proving unpopular, and called for cross-party support for 'those brave and principled heads who want to pay the best teachers more'.

The PISA report stressed the need to attract high quality teachers into the profession, and to staff the poorest schools with the best teachers. However, in a lengthy discussion on teachers' salaries, there was no mention of performance-related pay. It focussed on a lack of qualified teachers and the link between a 'poor disciplinary climate' and a shortage of qualified staff.

Earlier PIF materials made clear that PRP on its own would not lead to an improvement in teacher quality, and that the most important factors were to ensure that teachers are treated as professionals and 'leaders of reform'. This, the OECD claims, requires teacher education that helps

teachers to become innovators and researchers in education, not just civil servants who deliver curricula.’ (OECD (2012, p.4).

In summary, Gove’s speech sought to use the 2012 PISA results to promote policies which were in marked contrast to the messages of the OECD, which emphasised: making access to good education fairer, removing authoritarian accountability and equipping teachers to be more professional and have responsibility for what they do. Next, we examine the role and influence of the media in dealing with the same material.

### **PISA 2012 in the British Media**

The British print media is, by virtue of its ownership, largely considered to be right of centre and broadly sympathetic to the views of the Conservative party, which was in power as part of a coalition with the centre-left Liberal Democrats when the 2012 PISA results were announced in 2013. *The Daily Telegraph* (hereafter *The Telegraph*), *The Times*, *The Daily Mail* and *The Sun* are generally supportive of Conservative policies, with only *The Independent* (only available online) and *The Guardian* among serious newspapers being considered less right wing in editorial stance. Of these, *The Guardian* has traditionally been viewed as the serious ‘education’ newspaper, with its education editor reporting (private interview) that the audience for his stories would generally be more specialist and better informed than that of similar organs – education professionals, for example. The BBC, as state broadcaster, is required to treat subjects with impartiality and reflect different views. Similarly, the commercial broadcaster Channel 4 requires that stories must be presented with ‘due impartiality...in an appropriately balanced and fair way’ (Channel 4, 2017). Sky News requires similar adherence to balance and impartiality from its producers.

The reporting in the British media on the day the PISA results were announced mirrored the opening section of Michael Gove’s speech and many of the headlines repeated his wording. For example, the BBC online headline was:

'UK Makes No Progress in Pisa test: The UK has failed to make any progress in catching up global rivals in school tests taken by teenagers in maths, reading and science - and is no longer in the top 20 for any subject.' (Coughlan, BBC 2013a).

The themes of stagnation, failure to improve and the poor performance of English children identified by Gove were repeated in headlines across all mainstream news reporting of the PISA results: 'Must do Better! Poor Marks for UK teens.' (*Daily Mail*); 'UK Educational Performance 'Stagnating': Global study shows little improvement in key skills' (*Financial Times*) and 'UK students stuck in Educational Doldrums' (*The Guardian*). The following editorial extract from *the Independent* (online) newspaper is typical:

'There is no way to make the latest international education survey anything other than bad news for Britain. Not only do Asia's 15-year-olds continue to accelerate away at the top of the table – the top five are Shanghai, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea – but the UK's lacklustre 26th place is unchanged from the last Pisa ranking put together in 2009.'(2013).

The emphasis of immediate media coverage was predictably focused on the 'league table' rankings; something that the OECD distances itself from and has discouraged, while at the same time providing the league tables in its reports. Most coverage provided a ranking-style list, drawing attention to the English position, with key words like 'decline', 'stagnate' and 'fail(ing)' to indicate that performance has been poor; for example:

'But the UK has slipped in science from 16th to 21st place. Although not directly comparable, because there have been different numbers of countries taking part, this marks a sustained decline, with the UK having ranked 4th in the tests taken in 2000' (BBC, 2013a)

'UK teenagers are failing to keep up with youngsters in many Asian countries in reading, maths and science, according to a new OECD survey. Where has British education gone wrong?'(Channel 4 News, 2013)

All news outlets referred to 'rivals' and 'competitors' in other countries: for example:

'British pupils are falling behind rivals in China and South Korea in subjects such as maths, science and reading' (*Telegraph*); 'Pupils still lag behind world rivals in maths and reading' (*Daily Mail*); 'UK children lag world rivals in maths and reading despite reform' (*The Times*).

They also carried predictable 'blame' stories, for example 'PISA test results: 'It is too early to claim Michael Gove's reforms have failed' (*Independent*); 'The PISA rankings have exposed Labour's policies on education' (*Spectator*); 'British Pupils falling behind 'due to poor teaching'' (*Telegraph*).

In the days following publication, even when there were disagreements across providers about the *cause* of the perceived problem, with small exception (see below) none of the media outlets challenged the *essential idea* of a serious problem with English performance. This extract is illustrative:

'Teenagers in Britain still lag far behind their counterparts in the Far East in tests on reading, maths and science, a damning report will show tomorrow. Worldwide rankings will reveal that the UK has 'simply stagnated' since the last analysis four years ago – despite £30 billion being poured into education by Labour.' (*Daily Mail*)

Some publications also mentioned Shanghai. For example, having on results day reported that 'British schoolchildren are lagging dramatically behind their peers in the Far East' (3 December 2013), *The Daily Telegraph* then narrowed down the location in an item entitled: 'PISA Education Tests: Why Shanghai pupils are so special' (Philips, 2013), reminding readers that 'Shanghai was crowned — for the second time — the champion of PISA', and that 'Shanghai's students came top of the global class in maths...Shanghai was also victorious in science', using the language of competition and triumph to reinforce messages about the validity of the results. Much later in the article, noting that 'some experts question the value of comparing cities with countries' (the only criticism of PISA in a lengthy article), there is a reference to the difficulties Shanghai has with its

'outsiders' who 'dismiss China's education system' as a 'pressure-cooker style frenzy of exams that places too much emphasis on rote-learning and does little to stimulate creativity.'

The liberal, pro-capitalist magazine *The Economist* headlined with 'Diligent Asia, indolent West', offering a complex spider's web-style graphical representation of countries rising and falling over the six years since PISA 2006 which appeared to show Britain falling very dramatically in Maths and less dramatically in reading.

Despite intense coverage of the perceived problems with English education, there was, along with an absence of many of the OECD messages, no detailed media reportage of Gove's five policy solutions. There were passing references to non-specific earlier 'reforms' which had variously failed, not had time to work yet or were urgently called for. For example, BBC online carried the following brief reference to Michael Gove's speech:

'Mr Gove told MPs that his reforms, such as changing the curriculum, school autonomy and directing financial support towards poorer pupils, were designed to prevent schools in England from "falling further behind".' (BBC, 2013b).

*The Guardian* online coverage was distinctive; it ran no fewer than 13 articles on PISA on the day of the results being released. The main feature in *The Guardian* made no reference to Gove at all; but did call on commentators from other organisations (The Sutton Trust, the National Union of Teachers) to offer alternative views to the message of doom and failure. The negative messages were, nonetheless, reinforced by the headline, 'UK Students Stuck in Educational Doldrums, Study Finds' (Adams, 2013a). Later on results day, however, *The Guardian* online version did carry the only report on Gove's speech to Parliament, with comments from politicians and representatives of examination boards. (Adams, 2013b). In a piece entitled 'Michael Gove stands by School reforms', the education editor Richard Adams quotes directly from the statement to Parliament, focussing on Gove's commitment to improve autonomy for head teachers and drawing on opposing voices to the idea of free schools and academies, with reference made to the poor Swedish results as an illustration of what may result from this policy.

Statements about the 'dreadful' state of English education were often made with the addition of a 'despite' clause, referencing either above-average spending or new initiatives which had failed to improve performance. Most reports (BBC, *Telegraph*, *Guardian*) carried a brief comparison of the nations of the UK, some offering a glimmer of hope to the English in the face of data showing that Wales did worse, something which *The Telegraph* felt might be linked to the 'decision by the Welsh government to abolish education league tables and SATS tests in primary schools' (4 December). Aside from the *Guardian* report mentioned above, no media item carried details of the strong messages about increasing the power of head teachers, which formed the basis of three of Michael Gove's five pillars.

Despite the dominance of the messages outlined above in the mass media, some media outlets were not wholly uncritical of the premise of PISA. One of the 13 articles in *The Guardian* was an in-depth piece looking at the statistical methods used for analysis, questioning the translation of papers into different languages and challenging the idea that averages could be extrapolated to entire countries ('The Pisa Methodology: do its educational claims stack up?' (*The Guardian*, 3 December 2013). The article did not, however, extend any criticism to the underlying idea of PISA, nor of the validity of what it sets out to do. Sky News gave a lengthy report which began with the assertion that 'UK [is] lagging behind the Best', and details the extent of the 'failure to improve' over several paragraphs, before reporting the opinions of a head teacher:

'We know, because we have our own attainment tests in this country, that we are improving standards, and to compare us to South Korea or Finland doesn't make sense.' (Sky News, 3 December 2013)

Only one mainstream media article, in the *Telegraph*, focused on the negative aspects of PISA and challenged the assumptions implicit in Gove's speech. It began:

‘The results of the OECD’s Pisa tests are great. Not for our children, obviously, but for our politicians. Because if you’re a politician, the Pisa results can be used to prove whatever you want’,

...before going on to describe both Government and Opposition skewing of data, as well as the tendency to highlight reference societies:

‘The other great thing you can do is examine the education system at the top of the global league tables – that of Shanghai – and make it look as though its success has been achieved thanks to policies that are the same as your own, and unlike the policies of your rivals.’

(Deacon, 2013)

This piece of reporting was distinctive as it was the only example in the immediate post-PISA period which questioned the taken-for-granted assumptions of the legitimacy and validity of the data.

In subsequent weeks, however, some dissenting and critical voices were heard among the dominant calls for lessons to be learned from Shanghai and other East Asian societies. Space does not permit a thorough assessment of later literature; suffice to say that little challenge was offered by the media (neither later in the 2013-2014 academic year nor since) to the dominance of the discourse around English failure and stagnation, the need for improvement and the necessity of catching ‘global rivals’.

The academic community provided the first meaningful challenge to PISA 2012, in a letter signed by 83 leading international education scholars and sent to Andreas Schleicher, as well as various high-profile media outlets. The letter, published originally in *The Guardian*, on 6 May 2014 (Andrews et al, 2014) and provided a substantive criticism of PISA, ranging from the lack of mandate for the OECD to carry out educational improvements, to issues around the value of education for its own sake and the ‘shift of attention to short-term fixes designed to help a country climb the rankings’.



## **Framing, Crises and Mediatized Global Governance.**

We have illustrated how the initial presentation of England's PISA results by the OECD was interpreted and projected by England's politicians in ways that resulted in a significant distortion of the interpretations of the OECD. Edited out of Michael Gove's 'discourse of omission' were, most notably, the OECD's references to tracking and selection, teaching by ability, as well as other important factors identified by the OECD such as gender differences, exposure to formal mathematics teaching and the impact of immigration. Edited into his interpretation was a portrayal reliant on negative language ('stagnant', 'declining', 'falling further behind', 'leaving our children behind'), well suited for media reproduction, along with the prospect of redemption via his policies which offered 'freedom', 'aspiration', 'stretching' and 'ambition'. Overall, whilst the OECD sought to emphasise the questionable human capital imperatives associated with high performance on PISA, using complex messages based around equity and access, as well as teacher quality and a host of other factors, at the national level the filters of politics and the media applied their own logics and frames and remoulded the material for local public consumption.

The messages projected by the English media both broadly mirrored those of the politicians in reifying the nature of 'the crisis' and the comparisons with high performing nations. However, the media neither provided any significant coverage of the corresponding policy actions identified to remedy the newly-defined crisis nor did they critique the incongruence between Gove's statements and those of the OECD. This Rashomon-like disjuncture between the interpretations and projections of England's results advanced by the OECD and the local politicians, and the subsequent validation by the media of the PISA message as a 'crisis' of educational standards, has several implications, which we discuss below. These relate to: the nature and influence of the media messages, especially in the construction of a 'crisis'; the role of the media in the policy making process; and the media's role in the emerging regime of global educational governance.

The tendency for the media in England was to construct a crisis around PISA and to portray the results in terms of a global race in which England is dropping down the scoreboard, even if this is not accurate. This is consistent with the logic by which the media operates, particularly with regard

to the framing that we identified earlier. Framing is key to public perception of a crisis, and as Cho and Gower (2006) argue ‘the public perceives not the objective fact of a crisis event, but the fact constructed by the media or news releases from the party in crisis.’ (p.420). In the case of PISA, the rhetoric of crisis not only framed the event, but also served to direct the public’s interpretation and response to it. Four important news frames identified earlier were at play (attribution of responsibility, conflict/competition, human interest, economic consequences), as the media relied on what Warmington and Murphy (2007) term the ‘falling standards template’ (p72), which they claim is ‘predictable, simplistic, ritualistic, and based upon long established media templates’ (Warmington and Murphy 2004, p.296).

The result of this framing is the creation of what Shanahan et al (2011) term either a ‘winner’s tale’ or a ‘loser’s tale’ that calls for either the maintenance of the status quo or policy change. This framing of PISA results around a crisis of declining standards is not specific to England and has been noted by several authors (Takayama, 2008; Rawolle, 2010; Waldow et al, 2014). Baroutsis (2015) for example describes the media coverage of education as:

‘...negative, critical, oppressive and reductionist...These public accounts of schools portray public education systems, globally, as being damaged and in a crisis’ (p.568).

Yasukawa et al (2017) observe a similar ‘discourse of general calamity’ (p.277) in their study of media coverage of the OECD Adult Skills Survey. The dominance of this frame and the absence of alternatives following the release of the results was notable; it was accepted both by all political parties (who only differed with regard to the attribution of blame) and by media outlets with very different political sympathies. The consequence of this is a delimitation and narrowing of the public’s understanding of the state of education in England.

The media’s notion of crisis has been expanded outside the traditional realms of natural disaster and catastrophic accidents and is now the routine stuff of media stories and of policymaking – it is the frame on the policy window, the opening of the policy conversation, the stimulus for reform, and is therefore operating as a technique of governance (Lawrence, 2013). Crises contain the main ingredients of newsworthiness – they are negative, unambiguous and proximal.

Regarding the role of the media and its relationship with policy making; it is clear from the above that rather than 'merely' reporting the results, the media are defining the frame of the policy debate and in so doing acting as a political institution (Esser and Strömback, 2014, Cook, 2006). The result is an 'ever-closer linkage of newsmaking and policymaking to the point where they are indistinguishable' (Cook, p. 160) and our analysis would suggest a more direct and powerful influence than that of reinforcement of the status quo or the mere reporting of other parties' interpretations of the data. The linkage between the media and policymaking was, in this period, strengthened by the very high level of 'media capital' of Michael Gove; as the Secretary of State he possessed institutional capital and as a former journalist with a media friendly style, he possessed individual capital. It is noteworthy that his political capital was derived from the media as he was unpopular with the general public (such that he was demoted prior to the next election). Chakelian (2014) analysing why, despite his longstanding unpopularity with the public, Gove was an influential and powerful politician; describes the strength and source of his media capital:

'.... Gove is a darling of the media. He is a smooth performer, both during broadcast interviews and at the Dispatch box, and is given to using florid inventive language to ensure his soundbites really do bite.... As a former journalist at the Times he also has good contacts in both the Murdoch Press and other papers and knows how the game works.'

His speech seemed designed to work with media logic; providing ready-made headlines and a narrative which offered the raw materials for the media to create a crisis of standards which necessitated a policy response and deflected attention away from the policy details, which were not subject to scrutiny.

This example of mediatisation, however, only goes so far, in that media coverage did not extend to: the OECD's description of England's results; their interpretation of the implications of the international results; the policy recommendations in Gove's speech; or his distortion of the OECD's interpretation, suggesting that the media operated using its own rules and conditions. Michael Gove's policy agenda was reinforced by default in the sense that it was neither contested nor

challenged; but it was not actively supported either. 'Policy avoidance' might best describe the lack of engagement over the details of his proposed reforms; and in this sense the media's democratic role in scrutinising the actions of the powerful was effectively absent as they focused on constructing and essentialising an educational crisis.

The powerful impact of PISA on educational policies has resulted in the OECD being portrayed as the primary driver of a global form of governance, with increasing dominance over global education discourse and contributing to a convergence towards neoliberal policy solutions (Sellar and Lingard, 2013; Grek and Ozga, 2009; Simons, 2014). Our analysis suggests that whilst the debates arising from PISA share a common economic frame, the extent to which the governance of policy itself was, in the case of England, surrendered to a higher, global organisation, needs qualifying. We have shown that the media and policy messages derived from PISA were not those that the OECD prioritised, and that local actors significantly reframed and remoulded the policy possibilities of PISA. As Carvalho states:

'The 'plasticity' of the tool is a crucial quality in explaining why and how PISA is used differently by so many diverse actors ...' (2014, p.66)

England demonstrates a form of 'mediatised governance', in which the original OECD messages were interpreted according not only to political imperatives, but by the media in a synergic process driven by media logic which allowed PISA to be referenced and used to construct a crisis of standards and justify urgent reforms. The resulting emphasis on the negative frames identified above (conflict, responsibility, economic consequences – portrayed here as failure, decline and crisis) ensured that more complex, nuanced or long-term policy initiatives which accord less comfortably with newsworthiness values were largely absent. Also absent from the media coverage was the 'Fourth Estate' role of the media, which requires it to inform the governed about the actions of their politicians and hold the powerful to account by scrutinising those actions, that is a key feature of a modern democracy (Asp 2007). There was for example virtually no analysis of either the dissonance between the OECD's representations and those of Gove nor of the validity of the policies advocated.

Therefore, whilst PISA did not seem to directly affect the specific nature of the policy actions promoted in England, it did provide, primarily through its representation in the media, the unchallenged frame within which the policy debate was located. It is notable that the OECD rarely seems to challenge governments which use the data to promote policies with no valid link to the evidence. This is consistent with Auld and Morris's (2016) observation that the multitude of speculative, questionable and often conflicting claims derived from the PISA data by the consultancy industry are readily endorsed or ignored by the OECD. The priority seems to be to ensure that the discourse surrounding education policy across nations shares a common frame and that PISA data is accepted as the premier metric of quality. The result is the endorsement and reinforcement of the primacy of the OECD/PISA brand which facilitates the adoption of the range of new measurements of educational achievement being developed by the OECD.

The PISA 2012 data provided the opportunity for politicians to sow the seeds of a crisis of standards and promote policy actions with little connection to the OECD's report. Subsequently it was the media that sharpened that crisis into a simple narrative of falling standards and losing ground to other nations and provided a frame which highlighted the need for urgent reforms. We have argued that in the process of interpreting the PISA 2012 results both the politicians and the media in England were influenced by the rules and logic of the media. The outcome was a form of 'mediatised' governance that has shaped the way PISA was represented and contributed to a high degree of incongruence between the interpretations of the PISA data by the OECD and those of the politicians and media in England.

A focus on forms of global governance may overestimate the direct impact on policy making in nations of global agencies such as the OECD. Our analysis reveals that where the media operates with a high degree of autonomy it can exert a powerful influence on the representation of results and how they are framed. Mediatised governance may provide a complementary analytic to global governance that allows for more nuanced analysis within future research.

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