

# **The hidden curriculum of PISA**

## **- the promotion of neo-liberal policy by educational assessment<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to contextualise the PISA-evaluation as an exponent of an ongoing shift in the educational policy of many countries participating in PISA. The shift is considered to reflect a neoliberal understanding of the relation between the state, market and education. The paper point out some of the mechanisms through which the PISA-evaluations operate in order to promote the neoliberal interests of OECD. This general logic was considered simple but intelligent. It was interpreted as aiming at the supporting a combination of intercultural communicative activities oriented towards learning from each other with a simultaneous or parallel competition oriented mentality – a logic of competing and competitive cooperation. As this has not been formulated as an explicit aim of the PISA program it may be interpreted as a part of the “hidden curriculum” of PISA.

### **Introduction**

The aim of this paper is to contextualise the PISA-evaluation as an exponent of an ongoing shift in the educational policy of many countries participating in PISA. The shift is considered to reflect a neoliberally oriented understanding of the relation between the state, market and education (Uljens, 2005). In a Finnish perspective, this shift was

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initiated in the end of the 1980's and beginning of the 1990's (Uljens, 1998). It has been referred to as the educational policy of "the third republic" (Varjo, 2007).

Even if the PISA project strengthens the development of a neoliberal educational discourse, both nationally and globally, the project was prepared for by developments within many nations during the 1990's. Movements and actions that preceded the PISA project are being described from the perspective of Finland. The argument is that these preceding operations made PISA appear a natural continuation of an already initiated change process on the national level.

The paper also point out some of the mechanisms through which the PISA-evaluations operate in order to promote the neoliberal interests of OECD. This is considered important as it appears often to be forgotten that OECD is the organisation behind and running the PISA project. PISA is interpreted as a specific kind of a transnational, semi-global, educational evaluation technique previously unexperienced. PISA is thus interpreted as having been prepared by previous actions on local, national level, but that PISA in turn promote and strengthen the readiness to uphold a competition oriented cooperation within and between nations.

### **Doing the groundwork for PISA - the silent educational revolution**

The point of departure of the present chapter is the view that especially all large scale changes in education must be understood socially, culturally and as historically developed. Consequently, the claim is here that the PISA-project cannot be correctly understood without acknowledging it as an exponent of an ongoing shift in European and global educational policy. The shift today concern and cover all levels and areas of the western educational system, although in varying degrees in different countries.

The post-war period from 1945 to the late 1980's focused, in most European countries, on educational expansion, solidarity, equal basic education for all, equal opportunities, regional balance, and education for the civil society. In one word, it was the educational doctrine of the welfare state assuming mutual positive effects between economic growth, welfare and political participation (see e.g. Siljander 2007).

When the previous century "ended" in 1989, i.e. after the collapse of Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin wall, the political mentality in Finland had already started to change towards a more conservative direction in the 1980s and has since then developed stepwise in this direction, even though the movement was even more obvious in other countries, not least in Sweden.

The educational mentality of the past decades has reflected a discourse on excellence, effectivity, productivity, competition, internationalization, increased individual freedom and responsibility as well as deregulation on all societal areas (e.g. communication, health-care, infrastructure) including the educational sector (education law, curriculum planning and educational administration). As Varjo (2007) demonstrates in a recent study, the direction was clearly manifested in the Governmental program in Finland after the elections in 1990.

The project could be called the creation of the educational policy of the global post-industrial knowledge economy and information society. New Public Management ideas were introduced in the late 1980's and a so called agency theoretical approach, according to which the role of the state is changed from producing services to buying services, expanded. The model included, as we know, the lowering of taxes as well as techniques

for “quality assurance”. The attention also turned towards profiling individual schools and institutions and on increased flexibility e.g. in educational career planning. Extended freedom of choice on the local level was supported by e.g. decentralizing curriculum planning, first to the community level in the 80’s and to the school level in the 90’s. Parents were included in school boards. Salaries according to achievements were later introduced in the public sector. This mentality supported a kind of commodification of knowledge, “marketisation” of schooling as well as a much stronger view of national education as vehicle for international competition. The use of national tests for ranking schools was introduced in the 90’s as a mean for promoting a competition oriented climate. The education of gifted students became acknowledged, in addition to the strong emphasis on traditional special education. Limiting school drop-out is today motivated by its societal costs, rather than many other reasonable arguments.

Despite of all these changes the idea of educational equality has remained the guiding principle, but has become weakened. The process, by and large, reflect a view of the students or parents as “customers”, according to which parents were offered enlarged opportunities to choose in which schools the children attend, on the basis of the success of schools and their profile. The view of citizens as customers is also obvious in various EU documents (Heikkinen, 2004), (Finland joined EU in 1995). Education has increasingly come to be considered a private good, rather than a public good. During the past decade movements in this direction have been very obvious within the university system (law, financing models, productivity, etc.) in Finland.

The changes pointed out above reflect a silent but still continuing ”revolution” in educational ideology and policy. The development in Finland is similar to other European countries. Globally seen it is difficult not to consider the collapse of former Soviet Union as the starting point for the development of a new ideological and economic world order.

The conclusion of what has been said thus far is that the PISA evaluations, organised by OECD, were in many ways prepared for by the developments described above. The argument of the following section is that although international ranking of countries with respect to pupils’ success in tests is not a new phenomenon, taking into account how PISA has been constructed, governed and how its results have been distributed,

interpreted and made use of, makes the PISA-process an organic part of an ongoing "silent revolution" in western educational thinking.

### **Governing technologies used by OECD**

It is important to observe that the PISA evaluations are coordinated by OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development). OECD was founded in Paris in 1960 in order to stimulate economic growth and employment. OECD was founded by 20 countries but was extended in 2000 to 30 countries. A growing number of non-OECD countries have participated in the PISA evaluations.

The overall logic behind the strategy of OECD seems to be to support an increase of a competitive mentality combined with a system of having common standards over nations, as this is expected to be beneficial for a common market. The intention is thus, it seems, to combine competition with cooperation. The question is now through what mechanisms, operations or technologies this is put into practice? In the following some major strategies are identified that have been applied in and through the PISA evaluations in order to promote a competitive mentality combined with cooperation.

First, then, using transnational evaluation procedures following one single measurement standard, common for all and independent of every participating country, supports, in the end, the development of an increased homogeneity. The argument is that this occurs through a self-adjusting process. More precisely, the strategy applied is the following. As PISA is mainly focused on ranking of participating countries and not very interested in explaining differences between them, the burden of producing explanations is left to the participating nations, their governments, educational administration and the media. We saw this occurring after launching the results of PISA 2000, and even more clearly after PISA 2003.

By not offering systematic explanations to the reported differences in school achievements, a development of a self-adjusting mentality or a certain mode of self-reflection was promoted. Through this process the countries themselves begin to orientate towards certain types of questions and topics, i.e. to look for keys for success.

We all know that ranking of participating countries created an unforeseen alertness among politicians and within the educational administration to explain either the success or the lack of success.

From an OECD perspective this is all what you can wish for – to get nations engaged in the right issues, so to speak. By leaving the task of explaining differences to participating nations, media people and the like, national experts, governmental representatives and politicians are also free to make different kind of conclusions from the results. Thus, the policies emanating from the process varies between countries. Yet, this process leads to limiting the agenda for educational politics of a specific country. Instrumental policy issues, i.e. means for how things should be carried out and corrected, then becomes the main topic, while reflection related to the orientation and aim of education and schooling as such, diminishes. However, it would be wrong to say that the question of aims of education has moved to the background during this process as it is obvious, that all levels of education strongly emphasize that education, research and developmental work are core strategies for creating economic growth. As the aims are so obvious there is a risk that educational policymaking on a national level becomes a kind of educational managerialism or "procedurology".

A second strategy applied for promoting the interests dominating OECD is related to the construction of the tests and their relation to national curricula. One of the fundamental differences between the PISA evaluation and e.g. the IEA evaluation is that IEA took the national curriculum, its intentions and content as the point of departure. As it is quite natural to consider the national curriculum as the frame of reference when evaluating pedagogical efforts, it becomes important to try to understand why PISA did not evaluate what teachers in respective countries were expected to strive for? But what if the point also was something else, in addition to primarily evaluate the effectiveness of the educational system? What if the idea rather was use international evaluation as a technique for homogenizing the participating educational systems and to create a competition oriented mentality?

Homogenisation or increased coherence may be seen as one aim of interest to be reached from an OECD perspective, then the promotion of a competition oriented mentality is another, equally important aim. Having accepted this, the main question is

not concerned with the aims of education but the means of how to reach or hold a head-position.

A mentality accepting a never ending competition is deceptive as one cannot ever reach the goal or reach certainty. The only thing that is clear is that one has to struggle for keeping or bettering one's position. Competition is always accompanied by insecurity, and this insecure identity or mentality continuously strives to reach safety. The mentality supported is one of continuous Angst or feeling insufficient. Lifelong learning, that was first hailed as a deliberating policy has quickly turned out to be more like a life sentence than something emancipating. The individual is not allowed to reach "heaven on earth", but is rather expected to try to learn to live with the idea that a continuous learning process is the closest we can come to fulfilment in life. In fact this construction is not a recent or new one. In some respects it is a fundamental feature of the European tradition of Bildung. With the risk of over simplifying we could say that while the Bildung tradition emphasizes learning as emancipation, independence, self-awareness and maturity (Mündigkeit), the life long learning ideology or dogma explicates learning activity as something that the individual has to exhibit in order to meet "legitimate" expectations of those towards one is considered to be responsible. A learning attitude is the ethos of an "alert readiness to change" according to what the situation needs, but where oneself is not defining this situation. In this sense the life long learning dogma is opposite to the concept of Bildung.

## **Conclusions**

The intention in this chapter has been to develop an interpretation of the possible logic behind the PISA evaluation compared to earlier international evaluations. Also, the aim has been to analyze some of the mechanisms or governmental strategies made use of or operating in the PISA process. This general logic was considered simple but intelligent. It was interpreted as aiming at the uniting of intercultural communicative activities oriented towards learning from each other and a simultaneous or parallel competition oriented mentality – a logic of competing and competitive cooperation. As this has not been

formulated as an explicit aim of the PISA program it may be interpreted as a part of the hidden curriculum of PISA. International evaluations, in the shape they have taken in the PISA-process, thus include a kind of hidden curriculum, aiming at developing the educational systems of participating countries in a neo-liberal direction.

The analysis was not focused on what in fact was measured by the tests themselves or whether the theoretical foundation of the project was weak or not, e.g. with respect to how comparative educational research was understood. The point was rather, first, to pay attention to how the educational policy landscape in Finland, for its part, prepared for PISA and, second, to point out effects that this kind of evaluation procedure may have on the educational thinking of the participating countries. PISA was thus more understood as an instrument or technique used by OECD to support the development of a specific type of national educational policy. Expressed in the terminology of Michel Foucault the PISA-evaluation is viewed as a good example of how evaluation operate not by governing behaviour directly but by governing the self-government or self-conduct of individuals as well as, it seems, whole nations.

However, it has not to been claimed that the supporting of countries' competitive capacity by educational means, is a new feature of Finnish or European educational policy. It may, in fact, be argued that living with uncertainty and openness is a fundamental feature of the modern European tradition of *Bildung* (Uljens, 2007). Also the educational policy of the welfare state was, and still is, at least in Finland, to the extent it exists, built upon the conviction of positive mutual effects between economic progress, educational equality, social justice and welfare and active, participatory citizenship.

In order to avoid misunderstandings it should be observed, that, in this context, the term 'neo-liberalism' is distinguished from 'classical liberalism' (A. Smith). Classical liberalism is taken to refer to the idea that the state should *not* intervene in market related issues as the market regulates itself and automatically is beneficial for all. Neo-liberalism is then taken to refer to the view that the state does and should intervene in the market by laws and regulations of all kind. In the neo-liberal model, politics, economics and education are seen as mutually dependent of each other. The international development of the market economical thinking after 1989 may thus be considered as a renewed neo-

liberalist politics in which the relative impact of politics on the economy has diminished. This has created a dissonance in the "school-state-market triangle" (education, politics, economics) which is clearest visible in and through the contemporary discussions on the crisis of citizenship and citizenship education.

In conclusion, understood in the above described sense the PISA process is coherent with the kind of educational policy in Finland that has been evolving the past 15-20 years. The relation may also be seen the other way around: the educational policy of Finland, as it developed from the end of 1980's and beginning of 1990's, moulded the national scenery so that the strategies and technologies used in the PISA-evaluation appeared as a reasonable continuation of the national policy.

It was pointed out that this preparatory work was mainly carried out by applying three strategies: a) economisation, referring to the measurement of values primarily in economical terms, b) privatisation, as a movement towards partial deconstruction of collective, societal institutions in favour of private actors, deregulating laws and increasing flexibility of educational administration and increased individual responsibility and freedom and, finally, c) productivity referring to that activities effectively stimulating economic growth are supported.

One of the anomalies resulting from the international PISA discussion is how to explain that an educational system like Finnish comprehensive school indeed was able to produce better results and a smaller variation compared to parallel school systems, like those in Germany or Great Britain. One reason to why this raised so much confusion was the fact that the ideology behind the comprehensive school fundamentally differed from the OECD ideology more strongly emphasizing individual freedom and less state intervention.

PISA also has resulted in increased expectations for continued and extended success. In Finland the PISA success for the compulsory school system turned the attention towards the universities: why are our universities not doing equally well in international rankings? During the last few years many different steps have been taken in order to push the Finnish universities international success. One example is that the decentralized model of higher education, started in the end of the 1960s, is definitely left. According to the unquestioned rhetoric of today, large university units are considered capable of being

successful in many ways, not least when it comes to rising research funding and offering a stimulating study programs. This happens also on the EU-level (e.g. establishment of the European Institute of Technology, EIT).

A final note, or wonder, concerning where PISA is or has been discussed the past years. Compared with the immense attention PISA issues have got in the public debate all over the world, and the impact it has had on governmental policies and school practices, it is fascinating how seldom educational researchers touch upon the topic in international research conferences and journal articles. If the observation is correct, which I do think it is, then it seems that we have two different worlds of educational debate which are not necessarily in touch with each other. Is this how things should be?

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