



## ARTICLE

### **The discourse of international standard-setting: PISA tests and Norway, a critical discourse analysis**

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## **The discourse of international standard-setting: PISA tests and Norway, a critical discourse analysis**

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### **Abstract**

Employing a critical discourse analysis, this study considers three documents from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) assessing challenges related to the development of skills and educational outcomes in the triennial PISA-tests for fifteen-year-olds in Norway. It is argued that the language in the OECD documents secretes a particular commonsensical and naturalized (Gramsci) discourse that conceals the OECD's neoliberal machinations and legitimates unequal power relations. The study queries the legitimacy of an undemocratic organization's growing encroachment and influence in shaping educational policy in an egalitarian country ruled by a Conservative coalition in the last six years.

**Keywords:** PISA-tests, Norway, critical discourse analysis, democratic and education, power sharing and education

## **Introduction**

This study asks the question: what does the choice of language in the OECD's policy documents vis-à-vis Norway reveal about power relations and ideology? The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), founded in 1961 but with roots in the Marshall Plan enacted in 1948, is an intergovernmental organization with 36 members whose combined GDPs represent approximately two-thirds of the world's total (MBN, 2020). Of concern, and pertinent to this study, is the organization's unvarnished ambitions to 'set international standards'. The highlighted phrase in the citation below is from the original which serves to reinforce the organization's agenda.

"From improving economic performance and creating jobs to fostering strong education and fighting international tax evasion, we provide a unique forum and knowledge hub for data and analysis, exchange of experiences, best practice sharing, and advice on public policies and international standard-setting" (OECD, 2020)

In the realm of education, the OECD's aim of 'international standard-setting' has crystallized in the form of PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) tests since 2000. The triennial tests claim to measure "15-year-olds' ability to use their reading, mathematics and science knowledge and skills to meet real-life challenges". PISA's Director for the Directorate of Education and Skills, Andreas Schleicher, further claims that "PISA is not only the world's most comprehensive and reliable indicator of students' capabilities, it is also a powerful tool that countries and economies can use to fine-tune their education policies" (Schleicher, 2018).

According to critical discourse analysis, collocations such as 'international standard-setting' and 'real-life challenges' are nominalizations deliberately selected to delete agency and obfuscate the timing process in order to conceal power relations (Fairclough, 1989, p.103). In the same vein, it is anomalous that an organization that has built its reputation upon a discourse of 'international standards' operates with the diffuse 'real-life challenges'. The reader is left to wonder about the validity of centrally devised tests, crafted by an organization that is not accountable to its member states, preparing students for a future that is in constant flux. Understandably, scholars such as Professor Svein Sjøberg, perhaps Norway's preeminent critic of the PISA-testing regime, states:

"The OECD's PISA project is not an educational project. It is a political project and has to be understood as an instrument of power. PISA is normative, it tells what young people should learn, regardless of the nation's culture, nature, traditions and values" (Sjøberg, 2017)

## **"PISA-shock" and the Norwegian Context**

Studies show that there is political polarization among the electorate in Norway with respect to PISA results. While Labor voters tend to be skeptical and more committed to supporting the national educational system, Conservative voters embrace PISA as a supranational organ providing vital 'quality control' of the educational system – hence positing a nexus between PISA and neoliberal values (Ahonen and Rantala, 2001; Telhaug et al., 2006; Faldmoe, 2011). When the first PISA results were released in Norway in 2000, the official government discourse, buoyed by a frenzied media, coopted the metaphor, "PISA-shock", to interpellate the public into a sense of gloom and doom, despite Norway

placing above France, USA, Denmark, Switzerland and Germany (Sjøberg, 2019). By interpellation is meant the manner in which ideological state apparatuses discursively produce individual subjects through the process of 'hailing', as Althusser postulated (1971).

The metaphor of "PISA-shock" piggybacked on Conservative government officials' legitimization of major school reforms commensurate with OECD guidelines (Sjøberg, 2019). This predilection for employing tropes from the medical world to project authority (e.g. 'shock', 'diagnosis') will be fleshed out later employing critical discourse analysis. The dénouement of two decades of PISA tests in Norway is evident in the current proliferation of terms associated with neoliberalism: more testing, accountability, cost-effectiveness, teacher control and free school choice, to name a few. In his study, Haugsbakk (2013) demonstrates parallels between the Soviet Sputnik 'shock' of 1957 and the Norwegian PISA 'shock'. Both led to major educational reforms that gave further prominence to science and mathematics as drivers of economic growth, while relegating the teacher to the role of "a recipient of ready-made solutions emanating from technological experts outside the school" (Haugsbakk, 2013, p.619). The next section considers critical discourse analysis as both method and theoretical framework in teasing out the linguistic machinations embedded in PISA's power discourse.

### Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) encompasses several overlapping methodologies that aim to uncover the manner in which texts are ingrained in discursive social practices. According to Fairclough (2013, p.178), CDA is a theory of and methodology for analysis of discourse. He goes on to state that "CDA brings the critical tradition in social analysis into language studies, and contributes to critical social analysis, a particular focus on discourse, and on relations between discourse and other social elements (power, ideologies, institutions, social identities etc.)" (Fairclough 2013, p.178). In addition, this study builds on Wodak and Fairclough's (2010, p.25) four level context-model in analyzing the OECD documents:

1. Interdiscursive analysis of the shifting combinations of discourses within and between texts;
2. Analysis of the legitimation of policy objectives and proposals;
3. Analysis of distinctive and differential features of genres;
4. Analysis of some argumentative devices, such as topoi and fallacies.

Van Dijk (2003, p.352) refers to CDA as dissident research that rejects a value-free science. Scholars in CDA take an explicit position in order "to understand, expose, and ultimately resist social inequality", according to Van Dijk (2003). The latter explains the burgeoning corpus of research that applies CDA in understanding the enactment and reproduction of gender inequality, racism, islamophobia (Thomas and Selimovic, 2015), antisemitism and related issues. Ideology is central to the method and scholars in this tradition are concerned with *assumptions* built into relations, such as Fairclough's (1989, p.2) trope of the 'doctor and the patient' – especially as the power relations are distilled through language. The naturalized and common-sense (Gramsci, 1971) conventions that regulate (although unwritten) medical consultations gives expression to the taken-for-granted scripts in social practices:

“The doctor knows about medicine and the patient doesn’t; the doctor is in a position to determine how a health problem should be dealt with and the patient isn’t; it’s right (and natural) that the doctor should make the decisions and control the course of the consultation and of the treatment, and that the patient should comply and cooperate; and so on” (Fairclough, 1989, p. 2)

## Documents analysed

Norway was among the founding members of the OECD in 1961. Understandably, documents pertaining to the collaboration between the OECD and Norway are myriad. To begin with, the official websites of the OECD were explored with a view toward considering statements about Norway and the OECD. The gamut of data ranges from unemployment and housing to the moot, “12% are not satisfied with how they spend their time” (OECD, 2020b). From the national perspective, the Norwegian government’s official website presents a sympathetic view of the OECD partnership bordering on a eulogy. The ‘doctor-patient’ trope of Fairclough (2001) is manifest in the following sentence: “The OECD analyzes and discusses current economic and social challenges. In this way, the member states are given a better basis for designing political instruments to ensure economic growth and social security for citizens” (Regjering.no, 2020; all translations from Norwegian are the author’s). Halliday’s (1985, pp. 101-102) transitivity analysis argues, among others, that power relations are often concealed in the use of ‘action’ verbs. The sentence, “She kicked the ball”, for instance, has the active, doing verb “kicked”. “She” assumes the position of “Actor”. The material and verbal processes preponderate in the sentence above from the Norwegian government. The agentive OECD (Actor) “analyzes, discusses, ensures ...” while the member states are passivized – “are given a better ...” According to Fowler (1991, p.71), transitivity is the foundation of representation. The lexicality of choice in the government text belies its commitment to a neoliberal ideology: the word “economic” appears twice along with “growth”.

Beginning with the OECD and Norwegian government websites, a further three documents were deemed relevant to the purpose of this study. Among others, the nature and rationale for the OECD’s promotion of ‘skills’ and ‘educational standards’ were salient.

- OECD Skills Strategy Action Report Norway (OECD, 2014).
- Improving School Quality in Norway: The New Competence Development Model (OECD, 2019b).
- Country Note: Programme for International Student Assessment Results from PISA 2018 (OECD, 2019a).

The last document, *Country Note: Programme for International Student Assessment Results from PISA 2018 (Norway)*, provides a snapshot of “What 15-year-old students in Norway know and can do”, according to its report (OECD, 2019a). In essence, it provides a concise summary of Norwegian PISA results for 2018. The report breaks down statistics according to gender, socio-economic background, immigrants, staffing levels and school climate, among others. Hence, while serving as an easily accessible reference for Norwegian PISA results 2018, Wodak and Fairclough’s (2010, p.25) four level context-model was also applied to this document – argumentative devices, legitimation of topoi and fallacies, among others. Significantly, while admitting that reading results were worse in 2018 (499 points) compared to 2009 (503), the report assigns blame to the changing demographic:

“At least over the more recent period (2009-18), performance trends in Norway were influenced by the concurrent increase in the proportion of immigrant students who tended to score below non-immigrant students” (OECD, 2018, p.3)

It is argued that such statements provide fodder for right-wing politicians (Thomas, 2019) and have led to charges against schools that ask students with immigrant backgrounds to stay home during PISA tests. The right-wing Norwegian online newspaper, *Human Rights Service*, for instance, racializes and politicizes such statistics. Karlsen (2019) writes under the heading “PISA: Immigration has great importance” that while 2.7% of students from minority backgrounds in Norway were exempt from PISA tests in 2000, the number has increased to 7.9% in 2019.

### **Democratic deficit**

This study argues that a supranational organization, OECD, exercises unwarranted influence over Norway’s educational policies raising serious questions for democracy in education. As the leading US historian in the history of education, Diane Ravitch, contends, “There is something fundamentally antidemocratic about relinquishing control of the public education policy agenda to private foundations run by society’s wealthiest people” (Ravitch, 2016, p.211). To John Dewey’s (1966) mind, democratic education ought to provide a context for knowledge to change, evolve, develop and be free of constraints. This task is truncated given the mounting impact of the OECD in Norwegian education policy. For instance, PISA-tests can only provide a snapshot of what 15-year-olds know at a given time. Indeed, PISA does not even measure what is taught in schools. “Rather, the assessment focuses on what the OECD believes students should have learned from 15 years of life experience ... it cannot show what causes this performance” (Sellar, Thompson and Rutkowski, 2017, p.98). Despite this, these results are ossified into rankings based on a few metrics. An analysis of the documents below further reveals the manner in which a democratic deficit is perpetuated.

### **OECD Skills Strategy Action Report Norway (2014)**

“Skills are one of the main drivers of individual well-being and economic success in a global knowledge-based economy. The OECD Skills Strategy provides countries with a framework to analyze their skills, challenges and develop appropriate actions ...” (OECD, 2014, p.10)

In employing the verb “provides”, the document operates with categorical modalities which pretend that the world is transparent with the need for interpretation redundant (Fairclough, 1989, p.107). In opting for such categorical modalities, or what Fairclough (2001) calls a ‘terminal point of expressive modality’, the OECD secretes authentic claims to knowledge, the source of which is not divulged to the reader. Gramsci (1971) understood common-sense as an implicit philosophy where taken-for-granted assumptions are factored into practical social activities. It is argued that the official texts of OECD documents, as illustrated in the excerpt above, interpellate the reader into this common-sense discourse of the OECD’s credibility in its claim to provide member countries with a framework to analyze their skills. This has the effect of sustaining unequal power relations and deflects questions that interrogate the premise of the OECD’s underlying ideology.

“This OECD Skills Action Report builds on the OECD Skills Strategy Diagnostic Report: Norway, which provides a wealth of data, analysis and information gained from stakeholders during the diagnostic phase of the project” (OECD, 2014, p.12)

To begin with, the categorical modality “provides” is reiterated again. In addition to this, the text resorts to what analysts in the CDA tradition call intertextuality. The text above refers authoritatively to another text which the readers may have no familiarity with but is invoked as an unassailable source of knowledge undergirded by the word “diagnostic” in the title. Fairclough (2001, p.128) reminds us that presuppositions can be either *sincere* or *manipulative* but can also have *ideological* functions.

## The Illusion of Power-Sharing

“Stakeholders themselves have developed 14 proposals on how to tackle Norway’s 3 priority areas for action. The following proposals appear particularly relevant for Norway’s implementation phase” (OECD, 2014, pp.18-22)

In the Skills strategy action report (OECD, 2014), five “Key Actions” are recommended. Significantly, every one of the key actions has the citation above reproduced verbatim for all five key actions. The constant repetition, beginning with “The stakeholders themselves have developed 14 proposals ...” creates an illusion of power sharing. According to Fairclough (2001, p.96), “over wording shows preoccupation with some aspect of reality – which may indicate that this is the focus of ideological struggle”. The regurgitation of words, such as “develop”, is one such example. Twice Norway has declined European Union membership in two referendums in 1972 and 1994. One detects a need to reassure the public that the OECD is not dictating terms, but underscores through the five-fold repetition that “The stakeholders themselves have developed 14 proposals ...” This deference appears incongruent with the earlier certitude encapsulated in the categorical modality “provides” and the medical trope of “diagnostics”. It is argued that swinging the discursive pendulum from certitude to deference is intended to manipulate and position the reader as a particular subject – one who perceives the OECD as authoritative yet democratic. This is evident in the awkward and belabored reflexive pronoun “themselves”.

Under the subheading, “Realizing a common vision for Norway’s skills system” (p.12), the neoliberal credentials of the OECD are on display with the statement, “Reduced disability claimants” and “more carrots and sticks for better educational choices” (p.13). Apparently, this is supposed to be the common vision of the Norwegian stakeholders and the OECD. Many in Norway would demur. It would be fair to say, despite a declining percentage of the electorate voting for the largest party, the Labor party, that socialist values such as solidarity and worker rights enjoy cross-party support as opposed to a neoliberal vision of society. The above has been labored to destabilize the document’s purported common vision of the OECD and Norwegian stakeholders. Machin and Mayr (2012, p.139) remind us that the changed global economy did not arise in a vacuum but has been propelled by certain agents – e.g. the USA, IMF, World Bank, WTO and several large corporations. “There is no sense that any agents have been changing the global economy. The global economy is basically a result of free trade unhampered by national governments and trade tariffs” (Machin and Mayr, 2012, p.139).



### Improving School Quality in Norway: The New Competence Development Model (2019)

“For example, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) that gauges how well the students master the key subjects in order to be prepared for real-life situations in the adult world, has shown a positive development in the average performance of Norwegian students, which is now above the OECD average in all three disciplines (science, mathematics, and reading)” (OECD, 2019b)

The extract above refers to the diffuse nominalization “real-life situations in the adult world”. Sellar et al. (2017, p.36) query the checkered relations between PISA and Norway in the last two decades. Citing the Norwegian Minister of Education’s related response to PISA tests in 2016, they maintain that:

“These largely celebrated results in Norway consisted of no statistical difference in score change over three years in science (498) and math (502) and a modest 5-point increase in the minor domain of reading (513). The positive tone of the Norwegian minister’s initial remarks shows how average and largely stagnant scores can be seen as progress” (Sellar et al., 2017, pp.36-37)

Indeed, the same applies to the results for 2018. There is a clear contradiction in the OECD tributes and reports in the Norwegian media. The national newspaper, *Verdens Gang*, for instance, states, “There is a regression in both reading and science, but Norwegian students are approximately on the same level as previously, according to the project leader for Norwegian PISA, Fredrik Jensen at the University of Oslo” (Ertesvåg, 2019). Contrast this with the *Improving School Quality in Norway* which maintains that Norway, “... has shown a positive development in the average performance of Norwegian students, which is now above the OECD average in all three disciplines (science, mathematics, and reading)” (OECD, 2019b). In real terms, the change in scores may be trivial, but because the PISA brand has become synonymous with ranks, a shift in the coveted PISA league table triggers a cornucopia of reactions: “A nation falling in rank from 5th to 10th or rising in rank from 15th to 10th has barely changed in raw scores at all. But because PISA report ranks, making educational systems compete as if in a horse race, national hysteria or euphoria may follow the release of such information” (Sellar et al., 2017, p.x).

Rather than wait for the 2018 results to be released at the end of 2019, the OECD’s intertextual reference to 2015 adumbrates a particular paradigm of success in the reader’s mind – “Norway is set on continuing this positive development”. Fowler (1991, p.118) refers to this as the “narrative model; and by this device, the values associated with the model are cited”. Collocations such as “noteworthy success” foreground conceptual simplicity that is easily comprehensible to readers and avoids the need to analyze complex facts behind the formulaic generalizations (Fowler, 1991, p.177). Once again, the OECD is not engaging with facts and standards, as it claims, but seeks to create education in its own image.

Contra the OECD’s (2019) accolades about Norwegian “continued success”, the 2018 results released late in 2019 were actually disappointing, according to the then Knowledge Minister, Jan Tore Sanner (Ertesvåg, 2019). In the same report, the national newspaper, *Verdens Gang*, writes, “Norwegian 15-year-olds have scored lower in reading and science compared to 2015”. The minister wondered why



improved reading results at the primary level in other international tests were not reflected in PISA. This raises questions about what PISA really measures. In the *Meritocracy Myth*, McNamee and Miller Jr. (2014) point out that aptitude tests, such as SAT and ACT, which are designed to measure one's aptitude for advanced study, are very poor predictors of successful college completion. "High school grades are far better predictors of successful college completion" (McNamee and Miller Jr., 2014, p.115). This is commensurate with Ravitch's (2016, p.175) contention that tests do not measure the humanities, the aesthetic and moral aims of education and qualities such as resilience, courage, character etc. Education aims to also develop sound minds and healthy bodies and form citizens for democracy, not just teach basic skills. "Most tests should be written by classroom teachers; they know what they taught. But tests should be supplemented and, when necessary, trumped by human judgment" (Ravitch, 2016, p.175). The latter would require Norway to disengage from the PISA tests which are premised upon vague, future 'real life situations' and re-empower classroom teachers.

### **Discourses of Silence**

The Conservative-led Norwegian coalition has introduced various measures to improve teacher education, such as higher scores (in mathematics and Norwegian, for instance), a 5-year Master's degree in 2017 (up from a 4-year Bachelor) and a specialization track for either primary grades 1-7 or 5-10, among others. Despite this, there is growing concern about the discourse of accountability secreted through the OECD. Consider the ethos of accountability below under the subheading: "The question of accountability in a "trust-society":

"The Norwegian Education system is based on trust, and had limited control and monitoring mechanisms before the introduction of the national quality assessment system in 2004 ... Despite these efforts, Hatch (2013) considered that Norway had only moved "half-way" towards accountability ..." (OECD, 2019, p.32)

Commensurate with CDA's intertextuality, Thomas Hatch's (2013) article on accountability in Norwegian education was carefully studied. Hatch (2013) goes on to write the following about the so-called "half-way" accountability measures that the OECD document clearly has taken out of context. It is worth quoting his views at length:

"Rather than seeing this policy choice as a "failure" to fully implement an accountability system, however, I argue that these developments reflect the inevitable tensions between aspects of accountability that focus on answerability and those that focus on responsibility (Gregory 2003). Answerability emphasizes that individuals and groups should be accountable for meeting specified and agreed upon procedures and/or goals. Responsibility reflects the belief that individuals and groups should be held accountable for living up to and upholding norms of conduct and higher purposes that are often ambiguous and difficult to define" (Hatch, 2013, p.114)

Hatch (2013) operates with two dimensions of accountability: answerability and responsibility. The OECD narrowly focuses on the first, answerability, which Hatch (2013, p.136) identifies as the "tight alignment and efficiency that could result in chart-topping performance on international tests". The OECD extract, however, is silent about the second dimension of accountability, responsibility, which Hatch (2013) believes also characterizes the Norwegian system. "But it [i.e. the Norwegian "half-way"

accountability system] may also allow for more attention to the capacity-building that supports a focus on the fulfillment of broader purposes—an emphasis lacking in many other accountability systems”. What is suppressed or absent in a text is significant in critical discourse analysis.

“Political processes, and the discursive practices that enact these processes, often involve the creation of silences. Struggles over power and control are often struggles over whose words get used and whose do not and over who gets to speak” (Johnstone, 2018, p.70)

The truncated choice of one-half of Hatch’s (2013) notion of accountability speaks volumes about the OECD’s *modus operandi*. The architects of the OECD document are not averse to cherry-picking sentences in scholarly journals that are amenable to their discourse of accountability, while silencing alternative discourses. As Johnstone (2008, p.70) goes on to state, “Noticing silences, things that are not present, is more difficult than noticing things that are present, but it is equally important”. How many readers have expensive subscriptions to peer-reviewed articles and, if they do, are willing to invest the time in carefully perusing through their content? Once again, the neoliberal underpinnings of the OECD are evident below:

“The economic literature emphasizes the importance of designing the “right” incentives for a reform to take root, for an agent to follow the policy’s intentions. This includes taking into account the cost, the time, the beliefs, etc.” (OECD, 2019, p.28)

It is explicit that “economic literature” informs OECD educational policy. While the OECD seeks to shape the educational policies of affluent member countries, its counterpart, the World Bank, expresses the same ambitions in its policies towards developing countries in the global south, such as Rwanda (Thomas, 2018). Klees (2012, p.56) disparages the World Bank’s aspirations to become a “knowledge bank” – a clearinghouse for knowledge and best practice. He calls this economic reductionism “frightening” as there can only be “opinion banks” jostling and competing in the market of ideas, and not one knowledge bank. “The theories, practices, and even names of noted educators like Dewey, Freire, Montessori, and Vygotsky are curiously absent from decades of World Bank documents about education” (Klees 2012, p.56).

### **“PISA-Shock” vs. “Reality-Shock”**

In Norway, the previously alluded to metaphor of “PISA-shock” is often employed in the public discourse in a plethora of ways contingent on the user’s particular agenda. Sellars et al. (2017) apply the term ‘meme’ first used by the biologist, Richard Dawkins, to ideas and narratives that spread like contagion and evolve. The trope is coopted below, albeit with a twist – it is called the “reality shock”.

“However, two factors brought about a change in attitude to a greater focus on “quality” and an opening to thinking of the Norwegian system as a whole: The availability of results from PISA and the “reality shock” that Norwegian education was not the best in the world” (OECD, 2019, p.65)

The OECD omits “PISA” in the collocation “PISA-shock” and opts to use “reality shock”. This subtle change in vocabulary is aimed at distancing the organization from being associated with the “shock”, perhaps to convey a sense of dispassionate assessment. The phrase “two factors brought about a change” conceals agency and power. Fairclough (2001) reminds us that processes, such as

globalization, do not transpire on their own, but are propelled by agents. In opting for “reality shock”, the agentive “doctor”, PISA, is concealed and the onus placed on the “patient”, Norway, to borrow from the medical trope once again. Just as a patient with an unfounded sense of buoyancy with respect to the status of her health is jolted into a “reality shock” by the white-coat-clad doctor, Norway was given, not a “reality check”, but “reality-shock”. As is often the case with successful discourses, the authority of the one who administers such “shocks” is not a subject for discussion.

The so-called “reality” has been challenged on the basis of validity. A few examples follow. The top-scoring country is not even a country, but Shanghai. It is well-documented that the children of rural Chinese citizens who move to the city are barred from accessing PISA tests (Loveless, 2014). This inflates Shanghai’s performance. In addition, 72% of South Korean students accessed private tutoring at an estimated 18 billion USD a year, which is equivalent to 80% of government expenditure on primary and secondary education (Choi, 2012). Average South Korean test scores would fall by 0.47 standard deviations if private tutoring was banned (Choi, 2012). Sellar et al. (2017, p.44) also highlight the difficulty in comparing 15-year-olds in different countries with disparate years of schooling. “In other words, one student in Canada may have had 7 seven years of schooling and another 10 years; but in Norway, most participating students have had 9 years of schooling”. It is these anomalies that are silenced in the OECD discourse and subsumed under the trope of “reality shock”.

The documents considered in this study reveal asymmetric power relations in the OECD’s interactions with Norway. This asymmetry is implicit in the phrase “international standard-setting”. There is no effort on the part of the OECD to justify the basis for which it presents itself as the arbiter and custodian of “international standard-setting”. Toombs (2016, p.24) highlights three main sources of power, which it is argued, explains the manner in which the OECD accumulates power. The first is a need to identify and respond to the needs of other people. It is argued that the OECD capitalized on a perceived vacuum – some way of evaluating educational systems in more advanced countries.

The second source of power is determining the rules of engagement for resolving problems and conflicts. Toombs (2016, p.19) speaks of such agents as thinking unconventionally, creatively and hence changing the rules. The creation of PISA tests twenty years ago, and the persuasion of member countries to participate, despite weaknesses in regard to methodology, results and overall legitimacy, is an attestation to the OECD’s adroit handling of power relations. Finally, the third main source of power is the ability to tell and spread stories. “The power of stories depends ultimately on being able to disseminate them to others – many others” (Toombs, 2016, p.21). The OECD’s PISA tests have accumulated an almost unassailable aura of credibility due to its sheer reach, 37 countries, and number of publications and reports churned out (OECD iLibrary), among others. Of pertinence to the study is the question of how an organization that is preeminently an agent of neoliberal/market forces, and unaccountable to its members and national electorates, has significant influence in shaping educational policy.

Foucault’s (1999) technologies of pastoral power which morphed into modern forms of governmentality suggests that modern governments emulated the religious world (e.g. clergy) in taking on the role of

“shepherds” guiding, feeding and disciplining their citizens. Like the clergy, the source of this power was not evident. In our contemporary age of globalization, I argue that supranational organizations, such as the OECD, have coopted to themselves this pastoral role of “shepherds” for national governments (Thomas, 2015) – as evidenced, not only in the success of the PISA regime, but its constantly expanding mandate; PISA now measures “students’ well-being” (OECD, 2018, p.1).

## Teacher agency

The kind of two-fold accountability that Hatch (2013) outlined earlier, it is argued, overlaps with what Crehan (2016) suggests in regard to Finnish educational excellence. Building on the work of psychologists Richard Ryan and Edward Deci, she highlights a “triumvirate of relatedness, mastery and autonomy that supports intrinsic motivation” (Crehan, 2016, p.55). A unique blend of education (research-based masters), high-quality textbooks written by teachers, a sense of historical responsibility to forge a distinct Finnish culture in opposition to Russian hegemony and the valorization of autonomy all contribute to a holistic approach to accountability. Such is the premium put on autonomy that, according to Crehan (2016, p.549), “These days, teachers’ autonomy is highly valued among Finnish teachers to the extent that many say they would consider leaving the profession were they to lose it”. Ravitch (2016, p.xxvi), who travelled to Finland to assess Sahlberg’s claim of no accountability in Finland, writes:

“I found that what Sahlberg had said was true: the key to Finnish success was not testing and accountability, but a commitment to building a profession of carefully selected, well-educated teachers who were dedicated to teaching as a profession and respected by the larger society”

International benchmarking is the educational incarnation of the “diagnostics” discourse administered by, among others, the OECD, McKinsey and Company and the US-based National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE). Highlighting the ‘aberrational’ example of Finland, Hargreaves and Shirley (2012) argue that Finland’s educational success – what they call the ‘fourth way’ – follows a path that is quite different to the one advocated by the OECD and likeminded organizations. In brief, Finland valorizes the professional capital of the teachers, concretized in the following (Hargreaves and Shirley 2012, pp.49-56):

- *Human capital*: teachers develop the curriculum they will deliver; are competent researchers and have high emotional intelligence.
- *Social capital*: collaboration and trust; teachers feel a sense of responsibility for all grades. Teachers perceive the system as their ally, not overlord.
- *Moral capital*: a spirit of equity, care and justice, special education is not stigmatized but inclusive and given to about half of students. Not overwhelmed by spreadsheets.
- *Symbolic capital*: the teaching profession attracts high achievers and is highly respected even in politics and the media, rather than suffer criticism and abuse.
- *Decisional capital*: teachers are trusted by society to make the best decisions for the children. Teaching is characterized by “pedagogical conservatism”.

Sahlberg (2011, p.180), calls the global, market-driven educational reforms since the 1980s, the GERM-movement (global educational reform movement). GERM is characterized by the following: standardized teaching and learning, focus on literacy, teaching for pre-determined results, renting market-oriented reform ideas, test-based accountability and control - i.e. reporting data on every aspect of the teaching profession and hence the attenuation of teacher autonomy. Sahlberg states that Finland has not followed the GERM movement, yet persistently outperformed other nations. "Yet its achievements have been downplayed in numerous accounts of recommended policy" (Sahlberg, 2011, p.175). Significantly, Sahlberg has shared with Hargreaves and Shirley (2012, p.62) that "Finland has no word for accountability. Responsibility (*vastuullisuus*) is the closest thing to it. Collective professional responsibility precedes and supersedes accountability". In *Cleverlands*, Lucy Crehan (2016) travels on a learning mission to the top-performing PISA countries and is intrigued by Finland:

"There are no school inspections. There is no teacher evaluation. There aren't even national exams to hold teachers to account – right up to the age of 15, students' grades are decided by the teachers. So how can Finland possibly get such good results in PISA? Not only that – how can these results be similar across schools all over the country?" (Crehan, 2016, p.46)

Contrast the above with the OECD's recommendations for South Korea:

"Within the national teacher professional development and evaluation system, principals, teachers, parents and students grade the teachers; further professional development is required for teachers who receive low evaluation scores, thereby aiming to improve teacher quality and effectiveness" (OECD, 2019)

Foucault's (1977) approach to discourse, its punitive aspect in particular, has often been employed in critical discourse studies (Fairclough, 2001). Foucault (1977) deploys "panopticon" as a regime of discipline. Drawing on the British philosopher, Jeremy Bentham, panopticon referred to a cost-effective, model prison where the cells of prisoners were placed around a central tower. This architectural design conveyed the sense that the prisoners were constantly under observation. Extrapolating Foucault's panopticon to the OECD's 'best practices' from South Korea paints a disturbing picture: accountability is understood as "*teachers, parents and students grading teachers*". One can only imagine the unbearable levels of stress this would induce. Nothing remotely approaching such levels of accountability is applied to other professions. What criteria would underpin such a "cost-effective grading system"? Would the disparate "graders" have a common understanding of such criteria? The questions are legion. "Foucault's view is that educational practices that may appear more democratic, participatory, or progressive may in fact be more effective forms of disciplinary power" (Anderson and Grinberg, 1998, p.331).

Fortunately, even the OECD recognizes the inherent challenge in featuring this "best practice" from South Korea with the caveat "*there is a risk that teachers consider professional development as a penalty and do not fully engage in mutual evaluation*" (OECD, 2019, p.29; Box 2.2). It must be added that Box 2.2. featuring the reform in South Korea is from a publication (Yoo, 2018). Nevertheless, it is significant that the OECD focuses and presents only this aspect (teacher evaluation by students, teachers and principals). It is evident that the OECD recommends such policing of teachers through

scores and other forms of evaluation. There has been a visible conflation between such measures purporting to enhance accountability between the OECD and the Conservative-led coalition in Norway since 2013. A law was passed in August 2016 stating that high school students whose absenteeism rate was more than 10% in any given subject would fail to secure a grade in that subject (Thomas and Hennem, 2019). Students were expected to text their teachers if they were late or unable to attend classes. Failure to do so would result in increased absenteeism and a failed grade in the relevant subject. The citation below encapsulates the conundrum of GERM's (Sahlberg, 2011) obsession with control.

“It is mandatory for students to register their mobile numbers with the school’s reception at the start of the academic year. It is argued that this is a prime example of contemporary advances in technology augmenting the school’s panoptic surveillance regime (Foucault, 1977) – what can be called a “pan-mobile-optic gaze”, to update Bentham’s and Foucault’s uses of the term” (Thomas and Hennem, 2019, p.16)

The discourse of accountability and control, it is argued, serves to make the teaching profession less attractive and would be deleterious to the professional capital (Hargreaves and Shirley, 2012) of teachers in Finland, for instance.

## **Conclusion**

This study concerned itself with the question: what does the choice of language in the OECD’s policy documents vis-à-vis Norway reveal about power relations and ideology? The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has made explicit its ambition to set “international standards” in educational policy and the domain of testing (PISA), among others. I have argued that PISA tests have been boosted by the serendipitous rise of the political right in Norway whose ideology conflates with the OECD’s neoliberal underpinning.

The study has employed critical discourse analysis to two OECD documents with a view towards unravelling the nature of discursive assumptions built into relations, such as Fairclough’s (1989, p.2) trope of the ‘doctor and the patient’. For instance, the prescriptive lexicality employed in OECD documents, such as the categorical modality “provides”, secretes authentic claims to knowledge, the source of which is not divulged to the reader. The documents seek to project a sense of expertise and credibility as evidenced in the deployment of terms such as “diagnostics”. However, it has been shown that such certitude is difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile with the diffuse real life situations in the adult world that PISA purports to measure. It is argued that Norway’s deference to a supranational organization, with explicitly neoliberal interests, raises serious questions for democracy in education. Such contradictions abound; whereas the OECD projected “continuing success” for Norway’s PISA results in 2018, the results showed some regression in relation to 2015. The study has highlighted concerns related to validity and interpretations drawn from PISA tests.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is not without its limitations however. Among others, Rampton (2001) has critiqued the burgeoning research employing CDA for struggling to overcome written language bias and paying insufficient attention to interactional and dialogic texts. This limitation applies to this study



which has relied on policy documents and newspaper reports. However, there is the challenge of generating dialogic texts through the use of conversation or shared dialogue to explore meaning in regard to supranational organizations such as the OECD. Accessing prominent figures in the organization is notoriously difficult and researchers are generally referred to OECD publications. Furthermore, given that CDA is a discursively based framework, Rogers, Malancharuvil-Berkes, Mosley, Hui and Joseph (2005) have critiqued educational research for paying disparate levels of attention to theories of language brought to bear on CDA analysis in published works. This is acknowledged as another limitation in this study due to space constraints.

It is nevertheless argued that this study makes a modest contribution to the growing literature critical of PISA tests in Norway. Previous research has, among others, focused on problematic issues of methodology in regard to PISA (Sjøberg, 2018), the relationship between the media and PISA awareness in Norway, Finland and Sweden (Fladmoe, 2011) and the manner in which PISA tests have impacted upon educational reform in countries like Norway and Sweden (Haugsbakk, 2013). This current study takes the language in the OECD documents, with a particular focus on PISA tests, as its point of departure and considers how this mediates relationships of power commensurate with the contention, "Because language is a social practice and because not all social practices are created and treated equally, all analyses of language are inherently critical" (Rogers et al. 2005, p.367).

As an educator, it is particularly disconcerting that the OECD's encroachment into the education sector is underpinned by overt references to the "economic literature". Klees (2012, p.56) critique of the absence of "theories, practices, and even names of noted educators like Dewey, Freire, Montessori, and Vygotsky in decades of World Bank documents on education", is apposite with respect to the OECD's modus operandi in relation to Norway. The OECD documents cherry-pick sentences from peer-reviewed journals of education and suppress research that is antithetical to its discourse. Along the way, Finland's educational policy is considered as an alternative to the global educational reform movement (Sahlberg, 2011) characterized by testing, accountability and standardization, among others. It has been argued that following OECD recommendations will impede the professional capital of teachers and have deleterious consequences for the teaching profession.



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