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Original Citation

Tett, Lyn (2014) Comparative Performance Measures, Globalising Strategies and Literacy Policy in Scotland. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 12 (1). pp. 127-142. ISSN 1476-7724

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Comparative Performance Measures, Globalising Strategies and Literacy Policy in Scotland

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Abstract

This paper explores one example of an international comparison - the OECD's International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) - in order to investigate the power of numbers in both the shaping and the legitimization of adult literacy policy using Scotland as a case study. It is argued that policy implementation is framed by a common assumption that the production of knowledge will increase global competitiveness leading to the prioritisation of economic objectives in education. However, despite these globalising strategies, examples are provided of how the economic discourse can be resisted, to some extent, through prioritising more social objectives at both the local and state levels.

Key Words

Literacy; economic objectives; comparative performance measures

Introduction

The ranking of all kinds of institutions has become a common phenomenon in modern industrialised societies. For example, in the UK universities are ranked for their research achievement and the score they receive has a large impact on determining their future funding. These comparisons are popular techniques for governments because they provide information that is succinct and easily digestible and the competition that is set up often generates debates about the relative positions of those that are ranked (Martens & Nieman, 2010: 6). This ranking is not, however, unproblematic and can steer policy in directions that, whilst they might be unwelcome to many, can escape scrutiny due to the presumed neutrality of the comparison.

This is particularly apparent at the international level where a number of researchers (e.g. Martens, 2007; Grek, 2009; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010) have shown the role that comparative educational performance measures have in framing and steering education policy particularly through the statistics, reports and studies produced by the OECD. This is especially the case for those, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which measure the schooling performance of institutions and systems. Researchers have argued that the OECD, through its publication of education indicators and international comparisons, has become an accepted part of the policy lexicon across the globe and it has constructed a global educational policy field through the mechanism of governance by comparison (Lawn & Grek, 2012; Lingard & Sellar, 2013). Such comparisons legitimise political decision-making because 'the parties evaluated are implicitly pressured to converge towards what is regarded as *best* (either most effective or most appropriate) in line with the specific criteria of the respective framework of comparison' (Martens & Nieman, 2010: 7). Because these comparisons imply an overtly objective approach to decision making the mass media are keen to diffuse the results in a way that suggests the need for urgent decisions that seem undisputed and uncontested because they 'have been internationally asserted' (Nóvoa & Yariv-Mashal, 2003: 425).

This paper focuses on one example of an international comparison - the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) - that was organised by the OECD in partnership with national statistical research agencies in Canada and the USA (OECD, 1997; 2000). The aim is to investigate how the influence of the approach to literacy embodied in IALS, and the underlying assumption of a strong link between literacy and economic success, were enacted in Scotland. Scotland is a relatively small nation within the United Kingdom with a population of 5 million people compared with 50 million in its neighbour England. Although Scotland has been part of the UK for more than 300 years, and is subject to strong policy influences from UK political parties, the Scottish education system has developed separately, and has played a particularly strong role historically in the shaping and support of national identity (Paterson, 1997). Since 1999 there has been a new Scottish parliament and this has provided scope for further divergence of education policy as a result of different priorities and ideologies north and south of the border (Grek & Ozga, 2010). These particularities of the Scottish case are part of the reason for its choice as a case study, and others are discussed below, but first the analytical strategy used to investigate the power of numbers in both the shaping and legitimisation of policy is outlined.

Analytical strategy

The first part of the analytical strategy was to conduct a literature review of the role of international comparative educational measures. This review identified the main themes to be looked for in the later analysis of policy. The next stage was to identify the main OECD and Scottish policy documents that focused on literacy or skills. The policies that were included for the OECD were those published in 1997; 2000; 2001; 2012 and for Scotland they were those published by HMIE in 2010, the Scottish Executive in 2001 and by the Scottish Government in 2007; 2011; 2012.

These policies were analysed using critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 2009). CDA was appropriate because, as Taylor (2004: 436) notes, 'it is the combination of linguistic analysis with social analysis which makes CDA a particularly useful tool for policy analysis in comparison with other approaches'. The perspective taken by proponents of CDA is that the relationship between policy texts and the social practices and institutions is dialectical:

...that is, discourse is socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned – it constitutes situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people. It is constitutive both in the sense that it helps to sustain and reproduce the social status quo, and in the sense that it contributes to transforming it. (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997: 258)

In terms of policy documents, this meant identifying how particular issues were framed in terms of the knowledge, values and norms as well as the ideology (representations of aspects of the world that contribute to establishing and maintaining relations of power, domination and exploitation) that informed the document (van Dijk, 2001). The purpose of this part of the analysis was therefore interrogating how issues were defined in the policies and the solutions offered to rectify them.

The first step of the analysis was reading and re-reading the policy documents, noting down how literacy and skills were conceptualised and represented and what links were made to economic policy. The next stage involved looking at how these issues were framed both through the use of rhetoric and metaphor and also in the ideological work of the texts in representing, relating and identifying particular values

(Wodak & Meyer, 2009). The main finding of this analysis was that in all the policy texts the dominant discourse was focused on the production of knowledge and its economic application – a human capital ideology (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010).

Following the discourse analysis I drew on my own knowledge of the Scottish Government gained through extensive experience as a Principal Investigator on commissioned research projects (e.g. Tett & Maclachlan, 2007; Tett et al, 2008; Tett et al, 2011) to identify the senior policy makers/implementers concerned with adult literacy policy in the Scottish Government. I contacted the six key officials and three agreed to meet me in 2012 to discuss their views of the reasons for, and impact of, changes in Scottish literacy policy over the preceding five years. I had structured conversations (Brown & Duguid, 2000) with these senior Scottish policy makers. All the conversations were ‘off the record’ as the information that was shared was highly sensitive. This means that no recordings were made, nor transcripts produced, but nevertheless these conversations provided sensitising data on the current policy discourse in Scotland from those most closely associated with drafting and implementing these policies.

All aspects of this analytic strategy are drawn on in the rest of the paper to investigate the role of comparative performance measures. In the next section I discuss the role of literacy and the IALS survey in order to situate the Scottish case.

Literacy skills and the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS)

Having a literate population is regarded as important internationally because a high level of skills in a country’s population is seen as central to its prosperity. As revealed by the CDA the OECD makes strong links between individual literacy skills and economic returns. For example:

For individuals, investment in human capital provides an economic return, increasing both employment rates and earnings. This can be demonstrated either by looking at education levels, or at more direct measures of human capital such as numeracy and literacy scores (OECD, 2001: 3).

In addition the claim is made that skills development is fundamental to global economic competitiveness. For example: ‘OECD countries receive measurable and substantial positive economic returns as a result of strong literacy skills’ (OECD, 1997: 4). Moreover these skills are driven by individual endeavour and are regarded as a form of investment. For example, ‘skills have become the global currency of 21st-century economies’ (OECD, 2012: 10).

This model of education asserts that large sections of the adult population need to be ‘up-skilled’ (OECD, 2000: xiii) to cope with the rapidly changing competitive global environment. This means that literacy is linked ‘directly with economic development, individual prosperity and vocational achievement in what are claimed to be universal relationships’ (Hamilton, 2012: 170). Whilst this model is much disputed (Grek and Ozga, 2010; Rizvi and Lingard, 2010; Rubenson, 2009), nevertheless the human capital ideology of countries and their citizens as competitors in a global market place promoted through the OECD’s policy documents (1997; 2000; 2001; 2012) leads to an assumption of the importance of skills focused education and training. For example: ‘without proper investment in skills, people languish on the margins of society, technological progress does not translate into economic growth, and countries can no longer compete in an increasingly knowledge-based global society’ (OECD, 2012: 3). This means that it is regarded as important to

develop policy indicators that can measure performance across nations in order 'to contribute to the debate on the measurement of human capital indicators' (OECD, 2000: 62).

This comparative approach relies on the production of a seemingly objective measure through the bureaucracy of statistics (Nóvoa & Yariv-Mashal, 2003; Moutsios, 2010) but, at the same time, it also determines the 'classifications within which people must think of themselves and of the actions that are open to them' (Hacking, 1991: 194). Although the statistics produced by the IALS survey convey little about the context in which these data are interpreted because they are assessed through a 'broad set of information-processing competencies' (OECD, 2000: x) they are nevertheless regarded as 'an objective, irreversible "truth"' (Lawn and Grek, 2012: 99) by governments internationally. This is partly to do with the way in which policy is now steered by the knowledge and information produced through comparability (Rhodes, 1997). Comparison through these league tables of performance then becomes a strategy 'to move the discussion away from matters of government (habited by citizens, elections, representation, etc.) and place it in the more diffused level of governance (habited by networks, peer review, agreements, etc.)' (Nóvoa and Yariv-Mashal 2003: 428)

In addition to these issues about governmentality, concerns have been raised about the measurement approach taken by IALS. IALS aims to provide a comparison of levels of 'prose', 'document' and 'quantitative' literacy between participating countries using the same survey instrument (OECD, 1997: 2). This comparison is expected to provide equivalent interpretations in different cultures and languages in a way that would be context-free. The test items in the survey are based on an information-processing model of reading and cognition, meaning that the difficulty of test items is varied by making the language denser, or asking people to find more complicated bits of information (National Research Council, Committee on performance levels for literacy, 2005). It is claimed that these factors affect the ease or difficulty of reading. For example, if the information required to answer a question about a paragraph is found in the first sentence of that paragraph then the literacy task is presumed to be easier than if a person is required to read further or to sort through distracting information. The items used in the survey are the everyday kinds of task that people may encounter in their daily lives -generally referred to as 'functional' literacies (see Tett, 2010). These include tasks such as reading a bus timetable, deciphering an advertisement, or filling out a form. In addition, the assessments are open-ended tasks rather than multiple-choice (St Clair, Tett & Maclachlan, 2010: 11).

Two main types of technical criticisms have been made of the value of the IALS survey as a comparative measure. The first type is that the collection and analysis of these data are flawed (e.g. Blum et al, 2001; Carey, 2000). Blum and colleagues found that the psychometric criteria used in the tests did not provide a satisfactory basis for international comparisons. This was because of linguistic and cultural differences, translation issues and scoring and processing biases. Moreover they found that:

It was not possible to assume that the IALS measures only literacy. It seems to measure a combination of different factors: motivation (reflected in the different ways of filling in the questionnaire), understandings of what items mean, and differences in test taking behaviour more generally (Blum et al, 2001: 244).

The second type of critique is that the approach to measuring literacy comes from a particular paradigm that does not recognise the complexity of literacy (e.g. Darville, 2011; Hamilton & Barton, 2000). These researchers argue that the assessments used in IALS treat literacy as if it were a set of information-processing cognitive skills and deal primarily with formal text-based reading. Thus, as Hamilton and Barton (2000: 380) point out, whilst IALS claims to represent ‘*all* of literacy’ it ‘only provides a *partial* picture’. What is omitted is an acknowledgement that literacy only has meaning within its particular context of social practice and does not transfer unproblematically across different contexts. This is because:

There are different literacy practices in different domains of social life, such as education, religion, workplaces, public services, families, community activities; they change over time and these different literacies are supported and shaped by the different institutions and social relationships (ibid: 379).

Literacy from this perspective is seen as being constituted by its cultural context. This means that the IALS assessments, which seek to generate test items that are culturally unbiased, direct attention away from the ‘very features that are most essential for an understanding of literacy and its dynamic within everyday life’ (ibid, 382). In addition literacy researchers (e.g. Barton, 2006; Papen, 2005) point out that people use ‘multiple literacies’ to engage with different forms of literacy, such as media representations or icons to navigate the Internet and these literacies are not assessed in IALS.

However, despite these technical criticisms, the ‘league tables’ derived from the (poor) performance of adults from the participating countries have been strong drivers behind government decisions at the national level to invest in improving adults’ literacy. In order to investigate this further this paper now sets out the Scottish context to show why using IALS to assess the literacy skills of its population was a surprising decision.

Scotland and Literacies Policy

In addition to the particularities of the Scottish case mentioned earlier there are two further reasons for using the Scottish context to examine these issues. The first is that Scotland replicated, in 2009, the IALS survey used in 1996 as a way of assessing the literacy capabilities of its population (St Clair, Tett & Maclachlan, 2010). This was despite the well-known technical criticisms of it as outlined above. The second reason for examining the Scottish context is because the type of tests used in IALS directly contradicts another aspect of literacy education. This is that Scotland uses a ‘social practices’ approach where the *Scottish Curriculum Framework for Adult Literacy and Numeracy* explains that ‘rather than seeing literacy and numeracy as the decontextualized, mechanical, manipulation of letters, words and figures literacy and numeracy should be regarded as being located within social, emotional and linguistic contexts’ (Learning Connections, 2005: 3). This approach emphasises the importance of the context in which people use their literacy capabilities (Barton, 2006) and therefore it is not possible to assess literacy through standardised tests such as the IALS that claim to be context free.

Another problem of the IALS test is that it does not measure a number of aspects of literacy that are regarded as important in the Scottish context. One is that the capabilities that are priorities in Scotland ‘of being able to handle information,

communicate with others, express ideas and opinions, make decisions and solve problems, as family members, workers, citizens and lifelong learners' (Scottish Government, 2011: 2) cannot be captured by the tests. This is particularly the case in relation to people's use of literacy in their social contexts, such as at home or in the community. It is therefore likely that the skills measured in the tests of individuals do not assess what people can do in real-world settings. Another reason why the test items are inappropriate is that they require very little writing whereas the Scottish definition of literacy includes being able to produce, as well as engage with, texts (Learning Connections, 2005). Finally, although the test simulates materials and activities that adults may encounter in their everyday lives it does not capture how they engage with those materials in real-world settings.

So the information-processing model of reading and cognition adopted by the IALS survey does not capture most of the practices identified as important for learners in Scotland and yet this survey was chosen as the instrument to evaluate changes in the Scottish population's literacy levels. This means that the data on performance produced and collected by the survey were directly contradictory to the national curriculum framework for literacy endorsed by the Scottish Government. This leads to the question of why IALS was used as the assessment instrument in Scotland and this is discussed in the next section.

IALS in Scotland

There were a number of reasons for using IALS from the perspective of the Scottish Government that commissioned the research. One is that evaluations of national education and training systems require international points of comparison (see Nóvoa & Yariv-Mashal, 2003). The OECD has filled this niche in relation to education policy in terms of its work on indicators especially because external 'experts' create its surveys and this gives an advantage to national governments through having these externally defined standards (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010). Since the Scottish Government already used the OECD test 'PISA' to assess its school based performance then IALS was regarded as a similarly sound instrument (Lawn & Grek, 2012).

Another reason was that the Scottish Government had set a National Performance Indicator to: 'Reduce the number of working age people with severe literacy and numeracy problems' (Scottish Government, 2007: part 8) and so it was necessary to assess the differences in literacy capabilities over time using the same measure if they were to make a direct comparison. The last specific analysis of the Scottish population had been carried out in 2001 using the results from the 1996 version of the IALS survey so the commissioners of the research (Scottish Government: Social Research) deemed that the same survey should be repeated. This approach was, however, inappropriate when the method of measuring changes in literacy capacities adopted in Scotland was based on the distance travelled by each individual in the achievement of their own learning goals (Learning Connections, 2005).

A final reason for using IALS was that one of its important aims was to understand the relationship between literacy and economic indicators (Kirsch, 2001). This explicit link between literacy and the economic is significant, as a number of researchers have argued. For example, Martens & Nieman (2010) demonstrate how the OECD's interpretation of education as central to the economic performance of a

whole country has now become widely accepted together with the assumption that poor performance in education would jeopardize future economic prosperity. However, as Rubenson points out, the OECD's construction of this new international consensus through surveys such as IALS has:

Equipped the OECD with a particularly effective instrument through which to present a policy agenda that is allegedly evidence-based but where the evidence is viewed through the dominant ideological glasses. In this case, they have a neoliberal tint. (2009: 259).

In Scotland's case the Government has placed economic objectives at the heart of its policies. For example, their overarching purpose is 'to focus government and public services on creating a more successful country, with opportunities for all of Scotland to flourish, through increasing sustainable economic growth' (Scottish Government, 2007: 1). Moreover another policy stated that 'improving adults' literacies capabilities is crucial to securing a competitive economy' (Scottish Government, 2010: 9). Therefore using an OECD instrument was compatible with its economic, human capital focus and IALS was deemed an appropriate survey due to its international standing.

Having established the reasons for using what appears to be an instrument at odds with the Government endorsed practice of adult literacy in Scotland I now turn to a discussion of how the results of the survey were reported and its impact.

The impact of the findings

So far I have discussed how national policies are increasingly framed by the human capital ideology of the OECD in ways that promote particular understandings about the nature of literacy and society. However, these views are open to interpretation and this section discusses both how the findings from the 'Scottish Survey of Adult Literacies' (SSAL) (St Clair, Tett & Maclachlan, 2010) were framed and the impact of the findings.

When the findings from the SSAL were reported in 2010 the headlines were that:

- 73.3% of the Scottish working age population have a level of literacies that is recognised internationally as appropriate for a contemporary society;
- Around one quarter of the Scottish population (26.7%) may face occasional challenges and constrained opportunities due to their literacies difficulties, but will generally cope with their day-to-day lives;
- Within this quarter of the population, 3.6% (one person in 28) face serious challenges in their literacies practices;
- That one of the key factors linked to lower literacies capabilities is poverty, with adults living in the 15% of the most deprived areas in Scotland being more likely to have literacies capabilities at the lower end of the scale (St Clair, Tett & Maclachlan, 2010: 2).

The reporting of these findings in this positive way was unusual because other countries, such as Canada and England, had emphasised the lack of literacy skills of their populations rather than their strengths (Darville, 2011; Hamilton & Pitt, 2011). Instead the SSAL not only emphasised the strengths, rather than the deficits, of the skills of Scotland's population but also showed the link between the structural issue of

poverty and lower literacy skills. Again this was unusual because, as Hamilton & Pitt (2011) have pointed out in their analysis of the English *Skills for Life Strategy*, lack of literacy is commonly ‘collocated with negative, stigmatised identities’ (p. 598) that emphasise that lower literacy skills are the result of individuals’ deficits.

Grek (2009) has argued that using data produced by an apparently objective source can be used to justify change that might otherwise be contested or, alternatively, to provide support for an existing policy direction. In Scotland’s case IALS was used to provide support for the existing literacy policy. Scottish policy had diverged considerably from that of England since devolution in 1999 and with a Nationalist Government (SNP) in power that wished to have any divergences from English policy regarded positively (see Mooney and Scott, 2012) there was an expectation that this policy would be vindicated by the ‘objective assessment’ provided by IALS. Moreover, the wider international context represented by the OECD had provided an important reference point for Scotland as a means of challenging UK policy developments (Brown, McCrone and Paterson, 1998; Grek and Ozga, 2010).

Another aspect of these positive findings was that there was little media coverage since, as many researchers have shown (e.g. Lawn & Grek, 2012; Martens & Nieman, 2010), it is bad news that promotes interest. So there was little pressure on the government to change the broad thrust of its existing policy of focusing on the literacy practices of the learner and keeping its ‘social practices’ approach.

However, other aspects of the adult literacy strategy (Scottish Government, 2011), published the year after the SSAL findings, showed a change in emphasis. Here priority was given to the *financial* - ‘we live in a different world [where] public services are adapting to reduced funding (p 6) and the *economic* – ‘by 2020 Scotland’s society and economy will be stronger because more of its adults are able to read, write and use numbers effectively’ (ibid: 2) above most other aspects of provision. This changed emphasis was reflected in the distribution of funding and the associated systems of accountability. These are systems that, as Mary Hamilton argues, have a major effect on ‘teachers’ lives including the content and structuring of their everyday activities with learners’ (2012: 174). The funding that was available for adult literacy provision from the Local Authorities had been considerably reduced since 2007 when ring-fenced allocations were withdrawn so that Local Authorities had complete control over their budgets. As the overall budget available for the Local Authorities was steadily reduced, since adult literacy provision was not a statutory requirement, it was one of the areas to have the most severe cuts (see Hamilton and Tett, 2012). Indeed one way of interpreting the SSAL report was that the literacy problem was solved and this could give the Local Authorities the excuse that resources were no longer required to be dedicated to its provision. So whilst there was no overt change signalled by the new literacy policy and a rhetorical commitment to continuing its learner-centred, social practice approach that ‘has been internationally celebrated’ (Scottish Government, 2011: 6) the reduction in funding meant that overall provision was both curtailed and more targeted on particular groups and issues.

One general target that arose in the light of the SSAL findings (St Clair, Tett & Maclachlan, 2010) was a requirement that organisations ‘keep [the link with poverty] in mind when they are planning engagement strategies to reach prospective learners’ (Scottish Government, 2011: 8). However, it was a particular kind of poverty that was prioritised as the focus was expected to be on people that were unemployed or unskilled so using literacies ‘at work, [and for] gaining qualifications to progress

towards a job, or a better job' (ibid: 7) was emphasised. This emphasis is hardly surprising given the Government's prioritising of the economic but nevertheless had an impact on the systems of accountability that practitioners had to follow. The document that set out the expected outcomes of literacies work gave more focus to getting programme participants 'ready for work' and a new aim of 'increasing learners' chances of obtaining employment' (Scottish Government, 2012: 18) was introduced. The impact of this was assessed in a study carried out by Swinney (2012) where practitioners reported that they had to focus more on outcomes that were vocational and less on those concerned with family and social goals and were expected to prioritise those that were nearly ready for work rather than those with the greatest difficulties. This is a contradictory outcome to the policy commitment that literacy practices should be 'about learners developing capabilities in making decisions, solving problems and expressing ideas and critical opinions about the world' (Scottish Government, 2011: 7).

Another way in which accountability was exercised was through Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education who, in the review of adult literacy practice and provision in Scotland – *Improving Adult Literacy in Scotland* (HMIe, 2010), made reference to the absence of evidence of improvements in reading and writing particularly due to the lack of formal accreditation. Whilst the report was positive about the 'use of learners' individual learning plans to assess progress towards individual learning goals' (ibid: 52) this was regarded as much less important than the achievement of formal qualifications. The prioritisation of formal qualifications over the measurement of the 'distance travelled' by learners in the pursuit of their own goals thus steered practitioners towards a much more standardised form of assessment and away from the learner centred approach based on learners' own individual learning plans.

However, whilst there were pressures to change there was also resistance on the part of practitioners. They were supported by the commitment from the staff in the government advisory agency (*Education Scotland*) responsible for adult literacy policy implementation to maintaining the 'social practices' approach. This was partly due to this group of staff's practitioner background where they had been involved in community-based provision prior to their secondment to Education Scotland. Community providers are part of the strong tradition of community education in Scotland that has been influenced by the critical pedagogy of Freire (1976). This tradition validates the breadth and depth of knowledge that adults acquire in a variety of contexts and particularly through their lived experience and is thus learner centred (Tett, 2010). This led to continuing commitment to the system that assesses progress through the changes prioritised by the literacy learners themselves rather than by passing or failing tests that may have no direct relevance to them.

The ambiguity in the documents governing literacy provision cited here has also enabled practitioners to continue to put learners at the heart of policy implementation. Maxwell (2009) has argued that 'over the last decade as the [Scottish Government's] social heart has become more attached to social democracy, its economic head has inclined to neo-liberalism' (p. 131). This value struggle is apparent within and between the policy documents discussed. For example the Adult Literacies policy document (Scottish Government, 2011) emphasises the social justice argument that 'every citizen in Scotland [should] have the literacies capabilities necessary to bridge the poverty gap, to understand and shape the world they live in, and to enjoy the rich knowledge and benefits that being able to read, write and use numbers can bring' (p 1). On the other hand the outcomes policy says that: 'if an individual has a weakness

in [literacies] skills, they are less likely to make an effective contribution to Scotland's economy... This is potentially a drag on Scotland's economic capacity' (Scottish Government, 2012: 1). Practitioners have mainly seen themselves as working towards social justice (see Swinney, 2012) but it seems that the operation of the current financial and accountability regime is making these wider goals more difficult to achieve.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that data produced by the OECD through the comparison provided by the IALS survey can be used in both the shaping and the legitimization of policy. Martens & Nieman (2010: 7) have pointed out that pressure for improving national education performance can only emerge from poor results in an international comparison if the topic "education" is equated with a risk to overall economic prosperity. Whilst there is no clear link between literacy and economic prosperity (Rubenson, 2009), the hegemony of the human capital ideology in the OECD has made this an uncontested policy position. So when overall economic performance is framed as crucial, education policy becomes framed as crucial as well, and the need for improving education quality is seen as imperative. When Scotland found itself at the lower end of the IALS league table in 2001, it caused high pressure for improvement because its self-impression was that its education system was excellent. The shock of finding that many of its people had literacy difficulties led to on-going investment in adult literacy education that continued until the most recent recession in 2007.

The current audit and performance measuring culture (Power, 1997) meant that this investment needed to be justified and this was seen as most appropriately carried out through an apparently objective measure – the IALS. As Rose (1999: 208) has argued the power of numbers is such that they 'render invisible and hence incontestable the complex array of judgments and decisions that go into a measurement, a scale, a number'. So the IALS production of numbers has created standards and established best practices which in turn have produced pressure to improve (Abbott & Snidal, 2000). It also shows the role of the OECD in influencing national policy making through the globalising strategy of 'governing by numbers' (Grek, 2009).

Ball notes, 'policies are always incomplete in so far as they relate to or map onto the "wild profusion of local practice"' (Ball, 1994: 10) and Rizvi and Lingard (2010: 16) have pointed out that 'public policy remains a state activity and is produced in the bureaucratic structure of the education state'. This paper has shown both that practitioners can, to some extent, make their mark on local practice and also that the Scottish state can implement policy that reflects its own particular focus.

However, at both the practitioner and state level, policy implementation is framed by the OECD's dominant human capital discourse concerned with the production of knowledge to increase global competitiveness. This discourse is enacted through the power of numbers that influence governance by translating 'the messy details of peoples' lives and learning...into standardised and objectified categories through which they can be counted and made administrable' (Jackson, 2005: 774). IALS not only counted people it attempted to make them comparable by articulating what was expected of them using easy to calculate measures. This also means that political decisions based on this type of information insulate experts from 'external political attempts to govern them and their actions' (Miller and Rose, 2008:

212) because the technical nature of the data obscure the subjective judgements on which it is based (see Atkinson, 2012).

The seamless extension of economic objectives into education has far-reaching implications for Scotland's people by tying its current broad, learner-centred objectives much more closely into the employability agenda. This could result in a system that deems some people to be 'costly investments with unlikely pay-off', as Darville (2011: 167) argues is currently the case in Canada. This paper has shown that the OECD, through its use of apparently neutral comparative performance measures, has shaped the conduct of policy in Scotland. It has also shown that policy making is implemented at the local level and has a history that is tied to particular individuals and agencies that have their own views of what is appropriate. So although a shared understanding of policy goals has been shaped by the use of IALS there has also been resistance to this discourse. For the time being Scotland is sticking to its learner centred, distance travelled approach to assessment but the battle for this wider view, that questions the individualising discourse of deficit, requires constant vigilance on the part of all those that are committed to social justice.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the policy makers who were willing to talk frankly to me and to the referees for their constructive comments.

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