



Book Review

Christian Ydesen (ed.)
*The OECD's historical rise in
education: the formation of a
global governing complex*

London: Palgrave Macmillan
2019, 308 pp.

In this excellent collection charting the historical and current work of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Christian Ydesen, the book's editor, uses the term, "global governing complex" to capture and describe the extraordinary power of this relatively young entity (established 1961). The OECD, as Ydesen and other contributors to the book explain, exerts significant influence over the education policy of both member and non-member nations. As so many accounts of this phenomenon have pointed out, this influence occurs through soft power; essentially through the expert generation and packaging of comparative data. Ydesen writes,

In an era of overproduction of data and evidence, the OECD has managed to establish itself as a key supplier and interpreter of the type of evidence appreciated by politicians and decision-makers who can ascribe their narrative to numbers; the watchwords here are simplification, comparability and decontextualization (p. 2).

Certainly this is the way of things in the twenty-first century. Yet the OECD so saturates contemporary education policy talk that it is hard to remember that as recently as the 1990s there was little awareness of its education work outside such specialist circles as senior education bureaucrats and academics in the field of globalisation studies. This changed quite dramatically with the first PISA release in 2001, such that almost from one day to the next the OECD's international scholastic achievement rankings became the stuff of everyday public debate—and in some cases national panic, under the new coinage, "PISA shock". Illustrative of this development is an account of German "PISA shock" prominently displayed on the OECD's own website (OECD 2022). The OECD website, in keeping with the organisation's goals, is a model of accessible communication and the German case is offered there as an exemplar of OECD "impact".

The OECD has featured in the academic literature of education in two main ways. First, the various data it generates constitute a gold mine of evidence, notably for the field of education economics. Second, a foundational critical policy literature—which accelerated towards the end of the 2010s—identified the OECD as a driver of neoliberal globalised education reform (see, e.g., Rizvi and Lingard 2009; Connell 2015). While much of this second category of literature is cited in *The OECD's Historical Rise*, and several of the contributors to the book are themselves critical policy scholars, this collection offers a fresh set of perspectives on this crucial

institution by emphasising historical lines of questioning.

The OECD's Historical Rise originated in a research project funded by Aalborg University, Denmark, one of the aims of which was to establish and foster an international research network on the topic. It is published as one of the first in a Palgrave Macmillan series, "Global Histories of Education," a recently inaugurated series sponsored by ISCHE, the peak international scholarly society for the history of education. The book comprises fourteen chapters, including the editor's introduction and conclusion, ranging across the whole timespan of the OECD and across the globe. The fifteen authors, a mix of newer and well-established scholars, have written from universities in Argentina, Australia, Brazil, China, Denmark, Finland, Spain, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. What the chapters have in common is a distinctive historical sensibility and a rich empirical base. The sources are mainly documentary – focussed on archival records and OECD publications—although some also have used key informant interviews.

The book is structured into three parts. The first part, "Background to the OECD's Rise to the Role as a Global Authority in Education," with chapters by Regula Bürgi, Maren Elfert and Vera G. Centeno, prioritises the period from the origins of the OECD's predecessor organisation, the OEEC (the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation, established in 1948 under the Marshall Plan) to the early 1970s. It situates the OECD's origins in Cold War US ambitions to build European capitalism, in the post second world war history of the social sciences, and in a set of bureaucratic, organisational moves that

facilitated and entrenched the OECD as a policy actor in education.

The second part of the book, "The Impact of OECD Educational Initiatives and Programs in National Contexts" offers a set of detailed and grounded accounts of OECD relations with governments—with chapters by Frederik Forrai Ørskov (on Australia), Gabriela Toledo Silva (on Brazil), Karen Egedal Andreasen (on Denmark), Yihuan Zou (on China), and Felicitas Acosta (on the Southern Cone countries of Argentina, Uruguay and Chile). These chapters are useful for, on the one hand understanding the success of OECD advocacy across a range of differently structured and governed education systems, while on the other hand providing a counter to those treatments of the OECD in the literature (sometimes encouraged by the OECD's own public relations machine) that exaggerate the uniformity of its direction and dominance.

The third part, "OECD's Education Initiatives and Programs in a Global Perspective" focusses on key instances of recent and contemporary OECD campaigns for the improvement of schooling across the globe. It comprises chapters by Jessica Holloway on "distributed leadership," Antoni Verger, Clara Fontdevila and Lluís Parcerisa on "school autonomy," John Benedicto Krejsler on "Euro-global ideoscapes" and Steven Lewis on the development of new PISA products. Building on the earlier sections of the book, these chapters, taken together, challenge the ostensible neutrality of the reasoning on the basis of which the OECD promotes certain schooling practices over others, examine the organisational and technical mechanisms through which the OECD governs, and subject to scru-

tiny the “seductive powers” (p. 271) of OECD expertise.

Through its investigations, explorations and examinations of how the OECD was formed and what it has been doing for the past sixty years or so, the book invites readers into a truly multifaceted and sometimes contradictory world. As Ydesen says of the twentieth century documentary record, “opening up the historical files of the OECD clearly leaves the impression of a highly complex organisation that was sometimes at odds with itself” (p. 292). While it might seem an obvious point to make, the OECD is not just one seamless thing, and this book is helpful in teasing out the interactions of individuals and groups of people, the conduct of different programs and sub-units within the larger organisation (including forests of initialisms), and shifts over time. The collection is essential reading for the present moment and, given there is no current sign of an abatement in OECD influence, also promises to have a long shelf life.

References

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