

The politics of League Tables

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In the past decade, OECD and IEA-type studies have received massive public attention and subsequent notice by policy makers. In several countries, the magnitude of public attention and the policy usage of these international studies have been unprecedented. For many experts in domestic policy and school reform studies, an international perspective is now considered indispensable. Their attraction to reform models of other educational systems often arises from an interest either in simply "learning from elsewhere" (Phillips, 2000) or in active policy borrowing. This article focuses on the political usages of OECD- and IEA-type studies, and suggests that we examine in more detail how international league tables are used to advance fundamental school reform at national levels.

Despite the increasing trend of transnational policy borrowing and lending in education, how and why specific educational systems become objects of attraction, under which circumstances they lose attraction, and what impact cross-national attraction has had on borrowing reform strategies from one system to another (Ochs/Phillips 2002), have been understudied topics. In contrast to the normative endeavor that seeks answers to the questions "what can be learned and imported from elsewhere?" (borrowing) and "what can be taught and exported elsewhere?" (lending), it is important to draw more attention to why and how references to elsewhere have been used to advance local educational reform. In addressing these questions, we can possibly gain not only a better understanding of the phenomena of cross-national policy attraction and educational borrowing, but also acquire new insights into topical issues such as globalization and international convergence in education.

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An interest in understanding how the transnational flow of communication, ideas, values, capital, and individuals has impacted educational institutions and policies, traditionally a core area of comparative education studies, is now being shared by many other researchers in the social sciences and educational research, ones who typically situate themselves outside of the field of comparative education. The greater attention to research topics that had been genuinely comparative is intellectually stimulating and, at the same time, challenging for research and teaching in comparative education. The question arises as to how paradigms in comparative education differentiate themselves from other methods of inquiry and theories that also deal with issues of globalization and the international convergence of educational institutions and policies. There is a particular strand within comparative education research that is likely to generate a novel outlook on the study of globalization in education.

By advancing a new conceptual and methodological outlook on globalization, several scholars in comparative education have attempted to demonstrate that local reactions to external global forces have been seriously under-examined and deserve more attention. In response to those globalization studies that assume that educational systems are converging toward a uniform model of education and eventually become alike, the proposed project identifies, analyzes, and discusses educational policy borrowing across national boundaries, and scrutinizes in detail how "imported" educational policies have been locally adapted, re-contextualized and modified once they have been transferred from one system to another. The proliferation of references to "globalization" made by both lenders and borrowers is striking. The "semantics of globalization" - a term coined by Jürgen Schriewer (Schriewer 2000, p. 330) - has generated significant political and economic pressure to compare educational systems and to "learn" or borrow from each other. Implicitly, the semantics of globalization promotes de-territorialization and de-contextualization of reform, and challenges the past conception of education as a culturally bounded system. The semantics of globalization has been so effective that policy analysts and practitioners often resort to a new sort of patriotism, one that claims that the nation-state must transcend national boundaries in order to survive, both economically and politically, in today's "global village" (Jones 1998). Many scholars in comparative studies (Meyer/Boli/Thomas/Ramirez 1997; Boli/Thomas 1999; Ramirez/Meyer 2002) have demonstrated that global civil society and other international agents acting on behalf of globalization have contributed considerably to constructing and creating "global education" at a discursive level.

Clearly, OECD- and IEA-type studies lend themselves to examining institutionalized forms of transnational networking and communication, and scrutinizing the politics of league tables. We are currently witnessing a boom of studies that compare the results from student achievement tests across schools, districts, regions, and nations. Starting in the nineties, ranking and league tables have become important policy tools to accelerate change and innovation in educational organizations (Lowe 2001; Robinson 1999; Levin 1998; Kellaqhan 1996). TIMSS (Third International Mathematics and Science Study), the international study of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), for example, generated tremendous reform pressure in the United States and in the United Kingdom (Gorard 2001; Rust 2000). Similarly, the results from OECD's PISA study (Programme for International Student Assessment) made the headlines of all major German newspapers in December 2001, and continued almost on a daily basis to attract public attention in the German press, television, radio, and on the Internet. Particular attention was given to the low performance in reading literacy. Not only did German students score significantly below the average of other OECD educational systems, but the distance

between students performing in the top five percent and the bottom five percent was greater than in all the other 31 participating countries ([Baumert et al. 2001](#); [Artelt/ Schiefele/ Schneider/ Stanat 2002](#)). The great variation in reading literacy among students of the German educational systems triggered a major public debate on the need for fundamental educational reform demanding the introduction of standards, close and continuous quality monitoring, and a thorough re-consideration of the current highly selective educational structure, which tracks secondary school students into different performance levels. With the intention to learn from experiences from elsewhere, German comparative educational researchers have started to focus their attention on those educational systems in the PISA study that ranked top with regard to reading literacy (Finland, Canada, New Zealand) and to selectively borrow from these "more effective" educational systems. For example, the German Institute for International Educational Research is conducting case studies on European educational systems that significantly outperformed the German system in the PISA study ([Klieme/ Bos/ Döbert/ Klemm/ Lehmann 2002](#)).

National Policy Responses to International Comparative Studies

There are several factors that account for the great policy appeal of international student achievement studies. First, there is a move to evidence-based research in public policy studies in general, and outcomes-based education and standards-based education in school reforms in particular ([Chatterji 2002](#)). These distinct movements demand that public policies be informed by concrete data and figures, and that quality monitoring be enforced by means of continuous evaluation or, in the case of schools, by student assessments. Thus, from a theory perspective, the ranking and league-tables of OECD- and IEA-type studies constitute a measurable and easily accessible, albeit often biased and abbreviated, form of "scientific rationality" ([Luhmann 1990](#), [Schriewer 1990](#)), which enables political stakeholders in education to appeal to the general public when planning or suspending a comprehensive reform.

According to Luhmann's theory of self-referential systems, the act of policy borrowing, often presented as a lesson learned from elsewhere, is a form of externalization. Externalization, or references to other educational systems, functions as the last source of authority, invoked after self-reference falls short of its objectives, i.e., justifying an existing practice or introducing an incremental policy reform. In most instances, however, self-reference prevails and internal references are sufficient. Other common forms of externalization are, according to Luhmann ([Luhmann 1990](#); [Luhmann/ Schorr 1979](#)) and Schriewer ([Schriewer 1990](#)), references to tradition, organization and scientific rationality. A focus on the politics of league tables would enable us to examine two forms of externalization in more detail. The first form of externalization is the reference to scientific rationality, which policy makers in different parts of the world increasingly tend to frame in an international context in that they use results from cross-national analyses, produced by OECD- and IEA-type studies, to evaluate the effectiveness of their own educational system. The second form of externalization that lends itself to more precise examination is the reference to, and the selective policy borrowing and lending from, effective educational systems, which had been identified in such cross-national studies. Both forms of externalization, reference to the scientific rationality evidenced by OECD- and IEA-type studies and reference to effective educational systems, are inextricably linked to the semantics of globalization to which policy makers tend to resort when they publicly justify the need for "fundamental school reform" (as opposed to "incremental school reform") in their own country ([Tvack/ Cuban 1995](#); [Cuban 1998](#)).

It seems that there exists three extreme types of policy reactions, which I suggest to label as follows: scandalization (highlighting the weaknesses of one's own educational system as a result of comparison), glorification (highlighting the strengths of one's own educational system as a result of comparison), and indifference. It is further necessary to examine whether scandalization has led to increased policy borrowing (policy import from other educational systems), and whether glorification has led to increased policy lending (policy export to other educational systems). Examples of these different kinds of policy responses are listed in [Table 1](#).

By way of disclaiming the authority embedded in visual representations, it is important to point out that I have only listed in Table 1, found below, prototypical examples referring to three international comparative studies that were conducted in the 1990s: TIMSS (IEA), PISA (OECD), CivEd (IEA). These studies were completed, and their findings published, in the 1990s and in the first years of the new millennium, and thus enable us to examine the policy impact that they have had. Two of the studies represent different subject matters that are generally considered core subjects including mathematics and science (TIMSS), and reading literacy (PISA). The IEA Civic Education Study deals with a non-core subject matter (civic education), which is, in addition, often taught in several subject matters and supported with extra-curricular educational programs ([Schwille/ Amadeo 2002](#)).

TABLE 1. Typology of Political Reactions to International Comparative Studies

	TIMSS	PISA	CivEd
Scandalization	USA	Germany	N/A
Glorification	Japan	UK	N/A
Indifference	N/A	N/A	Germany

As mentioned before, Table 1 only lists extreme policy reactions that have been well documented in the research literature. As a corollary, several cells have been left blank (marked "N/A"), because more detailed research would be required to identify prototypical cases for the corresponding policy reactions. The Table indicates that TIMSS triggered a lively public debate in the U.S. media, mostly highlighting the weaknesses of the U.S. educational system in math and science. Five years later, the publication of the PISA findings elicited a similar response in Germany, leading to a scandalization of the German educational system in the German media, as well as among German politicians and educational researchers. In contrast, Japanese media glorified the Japanese educational system after the findings of TIMSS had been reported. Recently, a similar policy response by OFSTED (United Kingdom)

could be observed after the publication of the British findings of the PISA study. In both cases - Japan and the U.K. - the glorification of one's own educational system led to a re-confirmation of ongoing educational reform. Of particular interest for this special journal issue focusing on civic education is the question why the IEA Civic Education Study has encountered, compared to PISA, so little public and policy interest in Germany. This question is pertinent given that Germany ranked low in several areas including positive attitudes of German students towards immigrants.

Attitudes of 14-Year Old Germans Towards Immigrants

In the IEA Civic Education Study, German 14-year old students ranked lowest with regard to positive attitudes towards immigrants as compared to students from the other 27 countries that participated in the study (*Torney-Purta/ Lehmann/ Oswald/ Schulz 2001, p. 105*). Detlef Oesterreich (*Oesterreich 2002, pp. 147 - 165*) analyzes the German results of the IEA Civic Education Study in greater detail, and finds, for example, that German students are not as concerned with granting immigrants equal rights (equal opportunities with regard to education, residential rights, and, to a some extent, political rights), but do nevertheless expose negative attitudes towards immigrants.

Table 2 presents the percentages (agreements) for selected items that were used in the scale on attitudes towards immigrants. The German responses are des-aggregated (*Oesterreich 2002, Tables 3.14, 3.35, 3.36*) with regard to:

- nationality: comparing German students with immigrant students in German schools (columns 1 and 2);
- region: comparing students from the new "Bundesländer" (former German Democratic Republic/East Germany), marked as "East", with students from the old "Bundesländer" (former German Federal Republic/West Germany), marked as "West" (columns 3 and 4);
- gender, i.e., 14-year old females versus 14-year old males in all German schools (columns 4 and 5).

Column 6 lists the average German score on the selected items of the attitude scale, and column 7 presents the average international score found in the IEA Civic Education Study.

TABLE 2. Positive Attitudes towards Immigrants (in percentages) by Nationality, Region, and Gender (including average German scores and international scores)

	Nationality		Region		Gender		German Scores	International Scores
	GER	IMM	EAST	WEST	FEM	MALE		
Immigrants should have all the same rights that everyone else in a country has.	72	92	66	78	78	70	74	82
Immigrants who live in a country for several years should have the opportunity to vote in elections.	68	84	65	72	77	64	70	78
Immigrants should have the opportunity to keep their own customs and lifestyle.	59	83	56	64	65	57	61	81
Immigrants should have the opportunity to keep their own language.	59	86	52	64	65	55	60	78

I would like to highlight three aspects of xenophobia as reflected in Table 2:

First, the last two items in *Table 2* reflect by far the greatest, significant difference between students in German schools and students in the other 27 countries. Only 61% of 14-year olds in Germany agreed with the statement, "Immigrants should have the opportunity to keep their own customs and lifestyle," as opposed to 81% in the other 27 participating countries. A disparity between German and international scores of similar magnitude was found in the responses to the item, "Immigrants should have the opportunity to keep their own language" (German score: 60%; international score: 78%). Both items measure "assimilation" to German language, customs and lifestyle. This means that 14-year olds in Germany expect immigrants much more to assimilate as compared to 14-year old students in 27 other countries of this world (most of them European countries). There is a great distinction made in German social and educational research between "assimilation" (adaptation to the language, customs and lifestyles of the country of immigration) and "integration" (providing equal access to education and the labor market, and obtaining equal political, legal, and residential rights) of immigrants. As with immigrant interest groups in other countries, most immigrant groups in Germany advocate for an integration-without-assimilation, and highlight both the need for "cultural recognition" (the right to preserve one's minority language, customs, and lifestyle) and "social redistribution" (equal rights and equal access to resources) - a distinction used by Nancy Fraser (*Fraser 1997*) to denote the two different kinds of minority struggles. For more than twenty years, German scholars in multicultural

education (e.g., *Diehm/Radtke 1999*, *Gomolla/Radtke 2002*; *Bukow/Ottersbach 1999*) have, in line with immigrant advocacy groups in Germany, urged German institutions (including schools) to tackle discrimination, racism, and xenophobia and to implement an integration policy towards immigrants. It would be wrong to assume that the demand to advance a comprehensive integration policy is only shared by immigrant groups and by a select group of scholars and practitioners in German multicultural education. In fact, the "Kühn-Memorandum" that was issued more than twenty years ago, attempted to move away from a "Gastarbeiterpolitik" (a politics that views immigration merely as a transitional phenomenon) to a comprehensive "Einwanderungspolitik" (a politics that acknowledges immigration and pursues integration). For the past twenty years, memorandum after memorandum and political attempt after political attempt (most recently in 2002), have failed to introduce a fair immigration law ("Einwanderungsgesetz") and to advance a comprehensive integration policy. Xenophobic sentiments, as reflected in the German sample of 14-year olds, are widespread, and politicians risk losing votes from their (German) constituency if they commit themselves to introducing a comprehensive integration policy.

Second, *Table 2* illustrates significant differences between "East Germans" (from former GDR) and "West Germans," and between male and female 14-year olds. Consistent with the international findings of the IEA Civic Education Study (*Torney-Purta et al. 2001*), females display more positive attitudes towards immigrants than males. In addition, 14-year old "West Germans" express significantly more positive attitudes towards immigrants than "East Germans." The greatest difference, however, is found between German students and immigrant students in Germany (see next point).

Third, the first two columns of *Table 2* highlight vast nationality differences within the German sample. 14-year olds that hold a German passport display much more negative attitudes towards immigrants than 14-year olds in Germany that are immigrants (i.e., do not hold a German passport and were born outside of Germany). It is striking that the immigrant sub-sample in Germany is consistently more positive towards immigrants than 14-year old students in the other 27 countries. In other words, negative attitudes towards immigrants are not characteristic of all 14-year olds in Germany, but rather apply "only" to German nationals. These attitudinal differences between German and immigrant students, which are by far greater than the differences with regard to region and gender, deserve special mention. Both the volume on the international findings of the IEA Civic Education Study (*Torney-Purta et al.*, p. 105) and the monograph by Detlef Oesterreich (*Oesterreich 2002*, p. 159) make a point in stating that "immigrants" was translated as "Ausländer," a colloquial term for immigrants that bears a negative connotation. Oesterreich offers the explanation that the usage of the term "Ausländer" might have possibly introduced a bias in the German Civic Education Study in that it triggered negative attitudes. This explanation is interesting, but deserves a critical comment. The fact that the more neutral terms, "immigrants" (German "Einwanderer") and "minorities" (German "Minderheiten"), have not entered colloquial German speech is in itself revealing. In addition, the finding that 14-year old immigrants consistently score high on the scale "Positive Attitudes towards Immigrants" - in fact, higher than the international score - signals that the problem is not the usage of the term "Ausländer," but rather negative attitudes of 14-year old Germans towards immigrants.

Interpreting "Indifference" as a Policy Response

In the PISA study, German students scored below the OECD-average with regard to reading literacy, and in the IEA Civic Education Study they scored lowest with regard to positive attitudes towards immigrants. Both studies were released in 2001. The release of the PISA study led to a major uproar in the media, whereas the alerting findings from the IEA Civic Education study did not find much resonance in German public debate. Given that the German students did far worse with regard to xenophobia in the Civic Education Study, why was there such a political spectacle about the reading literacy scores of German students? Why did German politicians, policy makers, and educational researchers criticize the German education system for failing to prepare their students for reading literacy, but remained silent when it came to scrutinizing the effects of schooling on attitudes towards immigrants? The poor results in the reading literacy league table led to a scandalization of the German education system. In stark contrast, the fact that the Germans held the last rank in the international league table on attitudes towards immigrants was encountered with political indifference. This discrepancy forces us to reflect on the politics of international comparative studies, and to examine both at what stages of an education reform (cycle) and under which circumstances, references to international league tables are used to advance domestic school reform.

I would like to draw attention to three factors that may have accounted for the different political responses to the two league tables (scandalization for PISA, and indifference for Civic Education Study):

Centrality. Civic education or political education (in Germany "politische Bildung") does not constitute, in contrast to reading and writing, a core subject matter in schools. It is obviously regarded as less central to developing the overall literacy of students, and therefore finds less public attention and interest.

Efficacy. The class political education taught in schools only represents one of many educational sites where students develop political literacy. Other sites, to name a few, include the family, peers, media, associations, communities, clubs, and extra-curricular activities. The stated indifference of policy specialists and stakeholders towards political education reform might reflect the insight that much more than merely reforming a particular subject matter is needed to effectively improve the political literacy of children and youth.

Instrumentality. References to international comparative studies or to league tables tend to be made if (and only if) they resonate with ongoing domestic policy debates. The attraction to international league tables and to countries that "do better" often reflects the need to justify controversial school reforms at home. In Germany, debates about introducing standards, accountability measures, quality monitoring, expanding school choice and school-based management, etc., already existed prior to the release of the PISA findings (*Radtke/Weiss 2000*). For a variety of reasons, these reform initiatives were considered controversial. There was a need to have an additional source of legitimization or an "external authority" that would provide politicians and policy makers with the much-needed public support to advance these controversial reforms. Thus, the PISA study was released at a time, when the

demands for revamping the German system and introducing a fundamental school-reform were in full swing. After the release of the PISA findings, the references to "lessons learned from elsewhere" (*Phillips 2000*), "scientific rationality" (*Luhmann 1990, Schriewer 1990*), and the scandalization of the German education system served as a policy strategy to place "external pressure" (exerted by an imaginary global community) for accelerating domestic educational reform (*Steiner-Khamsi 2002*).

These concluding remarks - based on a very tentative interpretive framework that needs more elaboration - suggest that an analysis of the national policy context, and in particular a careful scrutiny of ongoing policy debates, is essential for understanding why some disastrous results in international league tables resonate with domestic policy makers (PISA), whereas other, even more disastrous results go by unnoticed (Civic Education Study).

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