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Global governance through peer review: the Dutch experience of OECD reviews of National Policies for Education

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to better understand the influence of international organizations within the national policy domain by examining the OECD's use of peer reviews. Focusing on one such review in the Netherlands, it asks: why are these reviews commissioned, who is involved, how are ideas about educational governance promoted, and how do they impact national policy. Data comes from interviews with OECD and ministry of education members who were central to the review process. Findings show that policy influence is exercised through subtle mechanisms including socialization, networking and negotiation. Both parties sought to benefit from the review, particularly from the OECD's perceived reputation as an 'external expert,' able to redirect politicized issues into more technical channels. Further, the Netherlands' status as a 'good student' and the partially restricted voice of the OECD in the Dutch context appear significant factors impacting the nature of the review process and national policy outcomes.

KEYWORDS

Global governance;
International organizations;
Peer review; Education
Policy; OECD

Introduction

A growing body of research is taking an interest in the influence that intergovernmental organizations, such as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), exert in the national policy domain. Whilst the OECD has no formal policy role in its member countries, its presence and sway within the national policy arena are significant. So far, the majority of research has turned to the OECD's gathering and use of data to exercise this influence (Grek 2014). In the case of education, the OECD's 'Programme for International Student Assessment' (PISA) has been massively successful in this regard, with league tables creating competition between nations and providing clear education goals to strive toward (Sellar and Lingard 2013; Niemann, Martens, and Teltemann 2017). This has resulted in the intensification of policy learning and transfer – often between systems which, administratively speaking, are quite different – and has led to the significant restructuring of many education systems, including those previously regarded as well performing (Fischman et al. 2019; Waldow and Steiner-Khamsi 2019). This has been attributed to the fact that more and more governments and key stakeholders conceive student achievement in international learning assessments as

a benchmark of educational quality and a driver of economic success and attractiveness (Komatsu and Rappleye 2019).

However, PISA is not the only means the OECD has for promoting policy ideas and change. This paper focuses on an under-researched governance mechanism at the OECD's command, that of the policy review: a peer review performed upon request from national (or regional) governments, that provides an overview of the country's main sectoral policies and challenges, with recommendations and guidance on how to improve the functioning and the performance of a system. In the education sector, the OECD policy review instrument most widely used is the 'Reviews of National Policies for Education' (RNPE), which focuses on multiple dimensions of education systems.¹ Since 1998, an average of 2.4 RNPE have been conducted per year.² Initially, these were conducted in OECD member countries, but are now increasingly conducted in nonmember countries also. RNPE can be characterized by their interactive nature, their reliance on field visits, and the length of the policy cycle they involve – lasting up to 12 months or more (Grek 2017). According to the OECD:

Education Policy Reviews are based on an in-depth analysis of a country's strengths and weaknesses, using various sources of available data such as OECD Programme for International Student Assessment, Teaching and Learning International Survey and The Survey of Adult Skills, national statistics, research on relevant policies and intensive discussions with stakeholders. They draw on policy experience from benchmarking countries and include expert analysis of the key aspects of education policy and practice being investigated.³

This paper examines the RNPE process and its enactment and implications in one OECD member state: the Netherlands. Whilst the Dutch are somewhat prolific participants in OECD initiatives and reviews, this research focuses on the most recent RNPE, published in 2016 (see OECD 2016). In particular, it examines how issues related to school governance, which are at the core of the OECD's education policy agenda (school autonomy with test-based accountability), are framed and advanced through the review, in a country where these governance structures are already in place.

By doing so, it contributes to our understanding of peer reviews as a global governance mechanism in key ways. Firstly, it adds to much needed empirical data in this domain. Given that RNPE have only been analyzed in a few national cases (ref), we still lack an understanding of the review process and beyond: how policy influence is manifested throughout, and what national conditions might result in particular (policy) outcomes. Further, the majority of research has thus far shone a critical light on the OECD's use of benchmarking data (PISA in particular) as a mode of transnational governance (Broome and Quirk 2015; Grek 2009; Niemann, Martens, and Teltemann 2017). This study broadens our understanding of the governance tools at the IO's disposal, and shows that in many ways, policy recommendations – simplified and transformed into 'neutral,' 'technical' packages – should equally be conceived and problematized as a form of institutional power. Finally, the research seeks to overcome the blind spots arising from, on the one hand, globalist perspectives of policy transfer that see IOs as influential actors successfully disseminating their agendas within national policy spaces, and on the other, skeptical views that see national actors instrumentalizing IOs to gain autonomy at the national level and help advance their policy preferences (Martell 2007; Mundy et al.

2016). It asks; why member states might participate in reviews, who is involved in the different stages of the review, how ideas are shared, negotiated and promoted throughout the process, and what are the policy outcomes and impacts of the review.

The ideas game: the role of policy reviews in the transnational governance of education

Policy reviews as a form and practice of institutional power

In the absence of legal and/or financial regulatory instruments, ‘the OECD is bound to play the so-called ideas game through which it collects, manipulates and diffuses data, knowledge, visions and ideas to its member countries and to a still larger extent, to a series of non-member countries’ (Marcussen 2004, 15). In order to play this game efficiently, the OECD operates as an ideational arbitrator and as a policy entrepreneur with several governance instruments at its disposal, such as benchmarking, data-gathering, idea generation, and peer reviewing. Peer reviewing has been characterized as a practice revolving around multilateral surveillance and indirect forms of coercion (Porter and Webb 2008; Schuller 2005). While such reviews are popularly conducted by international organizations (IOs), the OECD has been particularly active in using them (Pagani 2002).

Country reviews are led by a team of reviewers that combines both OECD staff and international independent experts. In the educational sector, the review process works as follows: as a first step, the Ministry of Education (MoE) of the reviewed country and the review team define the review’s scope and thematic focus. Afterward, the MoE tends to commission a background paper that will serve as the basis of the review. After some desk research, the review team visits the country for a period of about 15 days. In this visit, the team meets key education stakeholders and visits a sample of schools and other educational institutions. With the primary and secondary data retrieved, they produce a report draft, whose content is discussed with the MoE before publication. Once the report is ready, it is disseminated through different channels and, ideally, there will be a follow-up stage in which the team gives advice to the MoE regarding the implementation of recommendations.⁴ Whilst ‘peer review requires standards and criteria against which a member state’s policies can be reviewed’ (Porter and Webb 2008, 6) these criteria are not always explicit and accordingly, there is some level of discretion.

Through country reviews, national representatives, external experts and the OECD agree on formulating a set of best practices and norms for appropriate behavior and reflect on what could be the most effective policy instruments to ensure the internationalization of these practices and norms in the national policy domain (Drezner 2000; Marcussen 2004). Mahon and McBride (2009) consider that the OECD’s policy work can be characterized as both an inquisitive and meditative mode of regulation. Through practices such as benchmarking and peer reviews ‘member states are not obligated to follow-up specific policies, but they are required to “open up” to others to examine and critically judge what they are doing’ (Mahon and McBride 2009, 6). These practices are apparently more meditative than inquisitive in the sense that they ‘are mainly framed as discussion among experts about what is the best way or ways of doing something’ (Mahon and McBride 2009, 6). Nonetheless, despite often being portrayed as a policy

learning tool, country reviews also involve indirect forms of coercion and moral pressure. As Marcussen (2004, 18) observes, this is the ‘only means that the OECD has at its disposal in its attempt to execute multilateral surveillance.’

All these accounts highlight the normative dimension of IOs’ policy work, and the key role of socialization therein. Indeed, to a great extent, policy reviews are conceived to socialize national representatives with transnational norms, through a process that can be seen as ‘inducting actors into the norms and rules of a given community’ leading to ‘sustained compliance based on the internalization of these new norms’ (Checkel 2005, 804, in Grek 2017, 2): they are simply accepted as ‘the right thing to do’ (Grek 2017, 3).

Through country reviews and other knowledge exchange initiatives, national representatives and other stakeholders do not only learn about international policy trends, but also ‘develop their personal and technical skills, and even sometimes develop their personalities and feelings of belonging’ (Marcussen 2004, 16).

The politics of OECD policy reviews

In education, OECD policy reviews have received limited scholarly attention, particularly compared to the vast attention that PISA has received. This is unfortunate if we take into account that RNPEs can contribute to diffusion and internalization of the OECD’s educational agenda among national policy-makers, and to consolidate the centrality of the OECD as a policy expert in education (Grek 2017). A recent literature review by Verger, Fontdevila, and Parcerisa (2019) on the role of the OECD in disseminating accountability policies and norms in education notes that, in some cases, when picked up by the media, country reviews have the potential to trigger domestic dynamics similar to those sparked by PISA. In countries as different as Chile (Parcerisa and Falabella 2017) and Norway (Møller and Skedsmo 2013; Steiner-Khamsi, Karseth, and Baek 2020), RNPE recommendations on accountability have conditioned concrete policy changes (see Verger, Fontdevila, and Parcerisa 2019).

However, it is not the norm for OECD reviews to receive significant attention within the national education policy space, and the commissioning of a review is not necessarily the prelude to policy change (Verger, Fontdevila, and Parcerisa 2019). The usefulness of reviews ‘depends in part on the willingness of the country to confront issues and to be candid in the information it supplies’ (Schuller 2005, 177). Such readiness cannot be taken for granted. The ultimate impact of OECD reviews depends on their reception amongst senior policy-makers, but also amongst the domestic public (Porter and Webb 2008). The OECD is explicit that the effectiveness of peer review relies on peer pressure resulting from informal dialogs, public scrutiny and comparisons, and the impact of public opinion.⁵

An indicator of the influence of OECD knowledge products, such as review reports, is the explicit reference to these products in national political and policy processes. Of course, this does not necessarily mean that anything has been learnt from them or that policy is being changed, but it does at least illustrate a belief that an organization such as the OECD has a fundamental *raison d’être* and enjoys legitimacy in a particular policy field (Marcussen 2004; Steiner-Khamsi, Karseth, and Baek 2020). What is more difficult to capture empirically nonetheless is the normative effect of policy reviews, given the fact that this type of effect is rather indirect and that, overall, normative changes are gradual and difficult to observe.

In this paper, we argue that understanding a country's motives to commission a review is necessary to subsequently understand the impact and the (potential) influence of the review. As described, literature on global policy studies presents a dichotomy: between globalist accounts that may overinflate the influence of IOs whilst overlooking the agendas of national governments, and skeptical views that do not recognize the influential regulative processes, driven by IOs, that shape these agendas (Martell 2007; Mundy et al. 2016). The fact that several studies on OECD reviews in education show that, the recommendations of the review lose centrality once the commissioning government has been replaced (see Halton 2003; Grek 2016), supports, to some extent, the notion of national governments being relatively autonomous from the IO, and commissioning reviews with a political purpose. If not interested in the review's findings, the government might act as a gatekeeper – limiting its influence by restricting media attention (see Verger, Fontdevila, and Parcerisa 2019).

Overall, beyond trying to find out whose interests policy reviews serve the most, it is more appropriate to understand reviews as a process in which both the OECD and the commissioning country might have mutual returns. For the OECD, reviews are not only a way of expanding ideational authority and influence, but also a source of income. Education policy reviews cost between 150,000 to 250,000 Euros, and they are a significant source of income in a context in which OECD staff, especially in expanding divisions such as the Education and Skills division, are expected to sell more and more services to both member and nonmember countries (Lewis, Sellar, and Lingard 2016). Furthermore, the fact that national governments may attempt to politically instrumentalize the review does not necessarily place the IO in a situation of subordination. As some authors have observed, the OECD is not only aware of being 'used' by its member countries, but is frequently 'eager to be instrumentalized' (Centeno 2017, 100), as its agenda is only likely to succeed, acquire legitimacy, and enjoy wider circulation if its proposals resonate with national interests (Toledo Silva 2019).

Nonetheless, the power and ideas game described in this section is contingent on the position that countries occupy in the implicit hierarchy that exists within any IO (Cox and Jacobson 1973). This hierarchy is defined by countries' economic and political powers, but it also could depend on matters of policy involvement and compliance; i.e. the degree to which countries can be considered 'good students' of the IO. Thus, both the form of power that prevails between the OECD and its member countries and the autonomy of countries in relation to the OECD depend on the position, status and legitimacy that countries have in the stratified system of states that configure the IO.

Policy context: the OECD policy agenda and Dutch education

The OECD agenda for education

In public sector reform, the OECD is well known as one of the theorizers and international disseminators of New Public Management (NPM) (Pal 2012). Since the 1980s, the OECD, and in particular its Directorate for Public Governance is at the center of a global policy network that advocates public sector reform amongst member and nonmember countries as a way to promote transparency, policy effectiveness and economic efficiency in public services. To advance this agenda, among other measures, the OECD recommends that countries; fragment public services into smaller managerial units, adopt

outcomes-based management approaches, and develop professional leadership and external accountability systems.

These general recommendations have penetrated different policy sectors. Nonetheless, the OECD agenda in education is broad and sophisticated, combining a mix of social equity measures and governance reforms *a la* NPM. If we look at the policy recommendations more frequently found in the most relevant knowledge products of the OECD education division, social equity and comprehensive education (avoiding the separation of students into different tracks at early ages) stand out (Bieber and Martens 2011). Since the release of the first PISA reports, the OECD also theorizes about and promotes the adoption of an NPM approach to education governance consisting of the development of school autonomy, standardized testing and outcomes-based accountability (see Wöbmann et al. 2007; OECD 2011). PISA has been strategic in the dissemination of this policy model, which can be captured under the acronym ‘SAWA’ (school autonomy with accountability). According to a study that surveyed the 37 OECD country representatives, 29 countries admitted that PISA/OECD recommendations on assessment and accountability have influenced policy reforms at the national level, whereas 11 countries stated the same in relation to school autonomy and choice policy (Breakspear 2012). The under-studied role of policy reviews is even more intriguing in country contexts, particularly in those such as the Netherlands, which are seemingly well-aligned with the NPM and, specifically, the SAWA education agenda.

Education policy in the Netherlands: the ‘good student’

A core and long-standing characteristic of the Dutch education system is its early and diverse student streaming system: separating students into various types of secondary education (from more vocationally to more theoretically-focused) based on primary school performance. Another core characteristic is its high levels of school autonomy (Nusche, Gábor, and Santiago 2014). School boards are responsible for school quality while the government ensures system quality, largely through a well-established school inspectorate (see Glenn and De Groof 2005). Schools have constitutional freedoms, dating back over a century, including the freedoms of establishment, direction, and organization. This had led to complex governance networks through which the government ‘steers’ education (Waslander, Hooge, and Drewes 2016). Devolution has expanded over recent decades: NPM-driven decentralization policies saw boards and schools become responsible for managing their own budgets (known as ‘lumpsum’ funding), and private foundations take over the management of government-established schools. From the late 2000’s, with a widespread concern over slipping quality, this was countered with increased school accountability, including the introduction of core learning standards measured by (soon to become) compulsory, stakes-based testing (Browes and Altinyelken 2019). Dutch school accountability measures are both market- and administrative-based. Particularly at the primary level, parents may refer to published, easily-accessible school test results to guide their choice. Schools performing below average in national tests for three consecutive years will be considered ‘very weak’ and receive (extra) visits from the inspectorate. Although by law, schools can be closed for repeated poor performance, in reality this is extremely rare.

Debates surface and subside concerning these fundamental aspects of the system. The autonomy-accountability balance can perhaps best be understood as in a constant political flux: pulled between respecting schools' constitutional freedoms and ensuring sufficient quality. One clear example is the role of the 'end-test,' taken in the final year of primary school. Originally introduced as an optional and objective student streaming tool in the 1960's, in the 2000's the test increasingly became used for school accountability purposes, and in 2014 was made compulsory. Faced with a backlash over intrusion into schools' freedom to organize (one teacher union threatened to boycott the test), the test was also marketized, allowing schools a choice of provider. This legislation, which included compulsory testing in earlier grades, also resulted in widespread concerns of a growing 'testing culture', seen as damaging to students. To help address these concerns, the end-test's role in student tracking was diminished⁶ making teachers' advice the primary determinant of student placement in secondary school. These changes have concerned policy-makers (see Browes and Altinyelken 2019), undermining the comparability of testing (Emons, Glas, and Berding-Oldersma 2016) and resulting in growing student inequalities due to teachers' bias (Inspectorate of Education, Ministry of Education, Culture & Science 2017). The system of early student tracking has equally seen considerable debate over the decades. While the existence of 'bridge classes' (combined track classes) for the lower secondary level seemed like a practical way to delay the separation of students, these have been decreasingly common in recent years, particularly in light of market pressures (separating levels is seen as more attractive to parents of higher-performing students). A concern has grown amongst various stakeholders that movement between tracks is increasingly difficult (see for example Onderwijsraad 2010).

OECD policy reviews in the Netherlands

The Dutch have been somewhat prolific in their participation in policy reviews. Prior to the 2016 RNPE, OECD reviews were published in 2014 (one focusing on evaluation and assessment, another focusing on vocational education and training), 2010 (a review of migrant education), and 2008 (a review of the tertiary education system). The broadest and most comprehensive of these – the 2016 review in question – looks at the Dutch system from pre-school to upper-secondary level. The review was formally commissioned by the (then) Minister of Education (Jet Bussemaker) and State Secretary of Education (Sander Dekker), and focuses on how the Dutch system can be brought from 'good' to 'great' (see OECD 2016). With this in mind, while praising the governance structures that are rooted into the system (decentralized decision making, standardized testing and a strong inspectorate), and its comparatively solid student outcomes, the review makes key recommendations for improvement. Each chapter of the document is based on one of these governance recommendations. Amongst other things, as developed in the findings section, they advocate greater standardization at the input level, a more pivotal role of national testing, enhanced appraisal and evaluation systems, increased accountability, and further decentralization of decision making.

Methods

Data for the study was collected from three main sources. First, interviews with key stakeholders from the MoE and OECD review teams; second, content analysis of the 2016 RNPE; and third, analysis of other key documents (including the Minister's invitation letter to the OECD, terms of reference for the review, and the Minister & Secretary's response letter to parliament). To help understand the *response to* and *impact of* the review, online searches of major Dutch media outlets, the MoE's website, and websites of the government's main advisory body and sector organizations were also conducted. This was not done systematically, but to provide useful background information.

Actors who played a significant role in the review process were invited for an interview. Given that this study delves into the details of the RNPE, it was essential that respondents had played a key role, rather than, for example, holding a more distanced, consultative position. This resulted in a small number of selective, highly-rich interviews. In total, five expert interviews were conducted for the study; three respondents from the OECD review team, and two from the Dutch MoE. A third member of the ministry declined to participate.

Interviews were conducted between the end of May 2019 and July 2019. The majority were face-to-face, though one was conducted through an online platform. Interviews were semi-structured: based on a protocol, but flexible enough to be adapted to participant experience and expertise. The OECD and MoE protocols overlapped considerably so that data could be triangulated, yet differed on a few key questions. Interview themes included: the participant's personal role in the review, the background of the review (and reasons for its commissioning), the review team, the review process, findings of the review, and the reception and impact of the review. Interviews lasted at least 40 minutes, and many over one hour. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded using a coding scheme that primarily emerged from readings and re-readings of the interviews. The RNPE and key documents were coded using the same scheme.

Findings

Findings are organized into four sections by the questions that framed the research. Firstly, (1) the reasons for the MoE's commissioning of the review are addressed, along with how OECD reviewers saw their role and the role of the review. This is followed by (2) an examination of the agenda setting and review process, before (3) the contents of the review are analyzed, with a particular focus on SAWA content, highlighted problems, and policy recommendations. Finally, (4) the launch, reception, use, and impact of the review are discussed.

Reasons for commissioning the review

The Netherlands' involvement in the 2016 RNPE was largely taken-for-granted. Policy reviews are perceived by MoE respondents as a necessary way to keep an eye on the functioning of the system, combined with a sense that a national review was overdue. The OECD was a desirable partner with which to collaborate: on the one hand it was seen as an expert, able to offer unique insights, a systems overview, and advice based on multi-

level, multi-national data, on the other hand its attractiveness lay in its externality and perceived neutrality. Unlike national organizations, ministry officials did not consider the OECD to have vested interests, a political agenda, or pre-formed notions about the Dutch system. As such, the OECD was seen as the most suitable colluder to help the MoE realize its overarching aim: the pursuit of excellence (see Annex A in OECD 2016).

We wanted to do something with alignment, so if we all strive for excellence and if you get all the parties aligned and you can have an ambition and a similar frame through which we look at the system and how it works, then we - without trying to overhaul the whole system which takes a lot of energy - we can start by having a more coherent way of trying to improve and go from good to excellent. So who's going to help us by creating that frame? And then we thought - the only party that we could think of that will be enough outside of our system to get to create some distance as well as enough insight into an education system in a developed country ... And that's the OECD (Respondent 3, MoE).

Positioning the OECD as an external, independent expert provides considerable advantages: the MoE can use policy reviews to facilitate government agendas (agendas that might themselves be shaped by OECD discourse), by depoliticizing certain debates and providing space for a synoptic vision from which the government can begin reforming or restructuring the system. Here, interviews revealed a certain 'selective utilization' of the OECD. Its insights were required to help fuel the MoE's arsenal, and ultimately help steer policy in certain directions and away from others. Indeed, certain aspects of the Dutch system appear somewhat protected, and not open to debate. In particular, this included the cornerstones of the system – early student tracking and freedom of education – domains seen as historically-complex and difficult to be captured by an external actor.

So we didn't want a very big story about early tracking in the Netherlands ... we thought it wouldn't be very productive because this discussion has been there for a long time already and no political party is committed to postpone tracking, or at least not the majority (Respondent 4, MoE).

OECD actors, on their part, were quite aware of the political motivations behind the commissioning of the RNPE.

I think the Netherlands clearly has respect for the OECD report, but it's also very good at commissioning them at a time when they want and they think it could really contribute to the policy dialogue (Respondent 2, OECD).

They too, positioned themselves as the 'independent expert' and saw their role as an enabling one: helping to provide evidence-based clarity on issues that had become highly politicized and sensitive at the national level, by drawing on best practice and reframing them into technical, evidence-based channels.

And we are, of course, a completely independent body, so I think sometimes this is to raise the stakes a little bit in terms of political dialogue, so this is why we were brought in and I think it helped spark some of the policy dialogue on some issues which was needed (Respondent 2, OECD).

Establishing and negotiating the agenda and review process

Accounts on both sides describe the review process overall as smooth, ideas as a dialogue and decision-making as collaborative. This included decisions on who was involved in the review team.

Well the OECD has a list of potential candidates, top people that *they* know and they think are capable of performing a review because they have a certain level of understanding – most often in academia or policy. And they asked us, ‘Who do you think would be appropriate?’ And I said ‘I have no person in particular.’ I had a few people, Dutch people, who I knew were on the list and who I knew to be very strong ... but also again hobbyhorses, so I said ‘I don’t want them included’ ... (Respondent 3, MoE).

OECD review team members interviewed had considerable knowledge of the Dutch system, having been either brought up in it themselves, or having worked within it. They were also Dutch speakers. This is an important characteristic of the Dutch review, it automatically inducted the OECD team into the Dutch system and blurred the lines somewhat between the two parties. Further, contrary to protocol,⁷ there was reportedly no background country report produced by the MoE prior to the review. Rather, key pieces of relevant national research were collected by the MoE and made available to the OECD.

... [the MoE was] just feeding it to us, and I’ve been trying to dig for further research as well, together with my other colleague, but almost everything that we were trying to find was already being handed to us and that was such a big help (Respondent 2, OECD)

A number of important points can be drawn from this. Firstly, it reflects the strong Dutch tradition of system research and reflection. Given that this was deemed sufficient for background information, it also points to the OECD’s respect for this nationally-produced research. Finally, the ‘insider’ element of the OECD review team might be a factor here, contributing to a perception that the Dutch context was already somewhat known.

Stakeholder involvement during the process was described across the board as comprehensive, even ‘rigorous’. While the OECD had a template for desired respondents (actors, consulted in all review contexts), the MoE appears to have been instrumental in contextualizing this template. Consulted stakeholders ranged from teachers and teaching assistants to policy makers and academics, and also included many intermediary bodies (sector organizations) that are so relevant to the Dutch system.

Yet accounts also reveal a degree of friction: the result of some misaligned expectations during the agenda-setting process and of occasionally contrasting perspectives of the Dutch system. Regarding the former, agenda-setting was recounted as a product of negotiation.

... it’s always a question of how much attention do you give to certain topics. Some doubt for example about ‘should early childhood education be part of it?’ and some people from the ministry said ‘yes’ and then we thought, well for the Netherlands this is actually very relevant, so ‘okay, then it’s part of it’ (Respondent 2, OECD).

On the one hand, the OECD positioned itself as flexible and there to be instrumentalized. OECD team accounts describe the review as an opportunity for the Dutch ministry to ask questions about its own system, understanding RNPE as tools that governments can

shape to their own needs. This led to the frustration of one member of the ministry in particular, who believed that a commissioned expert should assume more of a driving role in the review process.

I said ‘I want to know what *you* think is weird, what strikes *you* in the Dutch system ... what do *you* think is not aligned?’ and they said ... ‘well, what do *you* think this is *your* opportunity’ and I was like ‘I’m not ... I’ve not hired the OECD to feed you with my suppositions or theses or whatever ... yet you give it back to me’. So that was ... awkward (Respondent 3, MoE).

On the other hand, the OECD’s flexibility had its limits. RNPE have pre-established parameters and the OECD was not afraid to reject ideas that ultimately did not fit this model. This ‘power of veto’ is significant, enabling the organization to remain in control of the review process.

... there was a big debate about putting higher education as well in this study, being very honest that would be too much broadening the scope, so we basically declined that part of the offer ‘sorry, this is going to be too much’ (Respondent 2, OECD).

During the draft-review process, contrasting perspectives of the Dutch system were revealed particularly with respect to early childhood education. Recommendations included; improving quality, increasing care hours, and addressing ‘fragmented’ provision and access. Female workers, it was claimed, were particularly disadvantaged by the system. Some MoE actors reportedly found this chapter unclear and overly critical. OECD reviewers claimed to have clarified recommendations, yet maintained their position. Both parties noted they had been satisfied with the resolution of these differences.

They were not too happy about it, because well ... it’s like a political discussion in the Netherlands ... should women go to work or not, should we have childcare, affordable childcare or preschool and stuff like that. So that was a bit of a political thing that they did not really like. But ... But we pushed through, we did not back off, so that was good I think. And this was one of the things that I think had most impact on the Minister at the time, because he really cared about this topic (Respondent 1, OECD).

‘Problems’ and ‘solutions’: a focus on SAWA policies

The Dutch system has a history of school autonomy, centralized testing and school choice, coupled with a strong Inspectorate of Education, reportedly used as a ‘reference’ inspectorate (Respondent 5, OECD). In short, the Netherlands is seen as a ‘good SAWA student.’ Significantly therefore, the OECD’s agenda is not to introduce *new* SAWA policy instruments, but to (re)calibrate and expand existing ones.

All seven of the report’s key recommendations, or parts of them, can be understood as essential elements of the SAWA policy model. This includes an expansion of decentralized decision making – shifting power from school boards to school leaders, as well as an expansion and hardening of accountability tools, through a greater (singular) role of testing in student tracking and school accountability, enhanced school board accountability, improved school self-evaluation and more selective intake and rigorous appraisal systems of teachers and school leaders. Recommendations also encourage clearer standards; including the development of a national curriculum for early childhood education

and teacher competency standards. Finally, there is an emphasis on encouraging top student performers – comparatively speaking, there is almost always room for improvement: ‘The Netherlands has more 15-year-old top-performers in basic skills than most of Europe, but is still behind some Asian countries ...’ (OECD 2016, paragraph heading, 81).

According to OECD reviewers, one of the main issues identified in the Dutch system was a ‘SAWA imbalance,’ with Dutch accountability tools in particular need of recalibration.

I mean, New Zealand and the Netherlands probably have the schools with the greatest levels of autonomy ... so of course there were issues around, in particular the capacity of the school boards to exercise their autonomy. [...] And also, whether that autonomy is well-balanced enough, with enough accountability (Respondent 5, OECD).

OECD respondents expressed a concern that ‘freedom of education’ was restricting the government’s ability to ensure quality and equity, and that accountability mechanisms had become too ‘soft’ and inefficient. This point was often raised in discussion of the primary end-test, whose liberalization in 2014 to respect schools’ freedom of organization, dramatically undermined its comparability function.

... All the indicators of accountability are becoming more loose over time. I mean, we used to have, at least *the idea* is to have freedom, balanced by accountabilities, so it’s checks and balances. But we are losing the balance here, because the freedom is getting bigger and bigger, and the checks and balances are getting weaker and weaker (Respondent 1, OECD).

A distinct advantage of autonomy, accountability and evaluation recommendations appears to be their versatility. Delayed student tracking for example, is framed as an equity issue, with the review highlighting ‘large performance differences’ between tracks as a particular cause for concern. The solution offered is a stronger role of standardized testing:

An objective track decision requires a single national end of primary test, which could be extended to examine a broader range of competences than at present. Nationally set objective standards on the required scores for each track level should be established and should determine entry to different tracks. Local discretion by primary teachers and the receiving secondary schools create both inconsistency and bias and should be removed from the decision. The transparency of such a system would be fair to all students (OECD 2016, 73)

Not only is standardized testing strategically placed at the center of the response to (perceived) key weaknesses, but, once this has been done, the scope and function of such tools can then be expanded.

SAWA is not only promoted through the review’s core recommendations and the problematization of particular national policies, but also through the explicit use of policy learning. Benchmarking is a key tool, used by the OECD to put pressure on governments through comparison. This method is employed throughout the review: in its provision of examples of ‘good practice’ from across the globe, in its use of graphs that rank the Netherlands against other OECD countries in various aspects of education, and – as seen – by drawing on PISA performance to show where gains can be made.

The concept of reference societies – considered to be those systems from which the Netherlands can learn most – is another key aspect of the benchmarking mechanism. In

OECD interviews, reference societies provided were often countries that had made significant changes to their systems following a recent review. As well as ‘good examples’ the notion of *counter reference societies* also surfaced: countries which could seemingly provide no useful policy lessons to the good Dutch student. Reportedly, this was due to different socio-geographical structures and systems of education, but equally, due to perceived poor performance.

... Well let’s be honest, the Netherlands does quite well, so you immediately start looking at some of the countries that are doing really well. So you don’t look to countries such as Mexico, which arguably aren’t doing so well in terms of education, but [also] in terms of geographical spread and scope [are] so different. So you immediately think of countries such as Scotland, and at the time even Wales started to come up as well as an interesting country. Estonia, Finland, Austria, Denmark, countries that the Netherlands *could* learn from and draw from in terms of their own reflections (Respondent 2, OECD).

Use and impact of the review

MoE respondents reported the efforts made by the OECD to maximize the review’s visibility and impact upon launch. This was interpreted by one ministry official (Respondent 3) as a ‘willingness to help governments improve their education systems.’ Yet, such publications are undoubtedly also crucial to the OECD, providing purpose and raising its profile and influence: ‘everything goes public, it’s the first and main rule’ (Respondent 5, OECD). An online search reveals that the published review was picked up by many of the mainstream Dutch newspapers as well as the sector organizations. Takeaway messages vary considerably, with newspaper headlines as diverse as:

Little Wrong with the Dutch Education System (De Telegraaf, 25 May 2016)

to

OECD: Dutch Students Unmotivated, Little order in Class, a lot of Talent Unused (de Volkskrant, 26 May 2016)

This underscores the (political) adaptability and instrumentality of RNPE. Yet, such headlines were fairly short lived: there was not an extensive, high-profile fall-out from the review, rather, despite the apparent efforts of the OECD, its (direct) impacts appear quite limited. One exception is in the area of early childhood education.

... so this government has invested maybe 70 million or something in early childhood education and childcare, to have some more intensive ... to raise the hours from 10 to 16 hours and also to invest more in quality. But I think there, there was also some political support and also the advice from the OECD so it fits well together (Respondent 4, MoE).

Limited direct impact of the review may largely be due to the nature of its findings, not delivering the insights the MoE desired.

They [the OECD] did put things on the agenda which I’m sure will pop up or have popped up again here and there. But this was not the great game changer that I hoped it would be (Respondent 3, MoE).

Recommendations that *were* made were not well-aligned with the political environment – requiring a restructuring of the system’s governance and intervention into those long-standing, politically-charged domains described earlier in this paper. Instead, in a formal letter responding to the review’s findings, the Minister and Education Secretary defended the aspects of the system highlighted as in need of improvement, such as early student tracking ‘we indicate that it is undesirable that pupils are not given the opportunity to follow the education that best suits their talents’ (MoE 2016). One OECD team member, aware of the more critical elements of the review, wondered if its launch had been downplayed.

I think on that day, two other reports came out from the ministry and the message from, I think Sander Dekker, that more money was going to secondary teachers. So basically that buffered the media attention a little bit for the report, and I think we lost media attention because of that. So that’s a little bit unfortunate, or potentially it might have been deliberate from the ministry, you never know, as there was some critical parts of the report ... (Respondent 2, OECD).

Given the significant changes made to the accountability system in the period preceding the review, there was a sense that pushing government for further changes at the time would not have only garnered frustrations. Rather, different issues were occupying policy debates, in particular, teacher action, demanding improved salaries and reduced work pressures.

Insights into the Dutch institutional context also offer important insights into the review’s limited impact. In contrast to what Grek (2017) observed in Sweden, in the Netherlands, the OECD is just one of many respected voices: a considerable amount of research is conducted nationally, and the government prides itself on its consensus-building approach to decision making. RNPE and other such reviews are resources that may help *reframe* but do not *lead* the education debate. Reportedly, changes made to early childhood education were only implemented once further research had first been conducted at the national level:

... in some EDPC⁸ countries, the OECD is really seen as an objective referee or as the grand authority, if they say ‘you need to step up’ they say, ‘oh of course that’s what we’ll do.’ This is not the role or the status of the OECD in the Netherlands. (Respondent 3, MoE).

This is not to say that such reviews lack political use or influence. RNPE can be used to help stifle undesirable social or political sentiments. In the Dutch case, it was felt that the report helped counter growing ‘anti-testing’ feelings in the country at the time, a sentiment several MoE actors worried would further marginalize the role of the standardized test: ‘I think the OECD proved a valuable counterweight to that’ (Respondent 3, MoE).

Findings can also be used for future political ammo, perhaps during periods of greater political openness.

I think it was quite well received, it touched upon certain points for improvement and it helps us in our work, ... if we have strategic projects then it helps to be able to refer to this report ... (Respondent 4, MoE).

Browsing the ministry’s website, the report was also found to have been used for retrospective purposes – to justify earlier reforms. Explanations of the school ‘lumpsum

funding' system for example, are justified using the OECD SAWA model of governance – that increased autonomy leads to improved student performance – and referenced with a link to information on the RNPE.

Four years have now passed since the 2016 review's publication, offering some time to better observe policy developments and uses of the report. In this time, the Netherlands has ushered in a new government and a new Minister and Secretary of Education. Debates that at the time had subsided, have now reawakened, with movements seen in the direction of OECD recommendations, including proposed changes to the end-test⁹ and a collective of influential stakeholders pushing for delayed student tracking.¹⁰ So far, use of the RNPE in these initiatives appears limited, but importantly, the review captured and to some extent contributed to reinforce a climate of opinion that problematized, for example, the Dutch legacy with early tracking.

Discussion and conclusions

This study has analyzed policy reviews as a mechanism of global governance, and has aimed to better understand the influence of the OECD in the national education sphere through the use of these products. To do so, the paper draws on the Netherlands as a case study where a Review of National Policies for Education, carried out by the OECD, was published in 2016. The research has examined the policy review process in detail through its different stages: from its inception, to the data gathering process, the report's elaboration, its release, and impact.

Findings indicate a departure from previous perspectives. They do not align with globalist, nor with skeptical views of policy transfer, rather, indicate a certain symbiosis. Certainly in the case of the Netherlands, the RNPE should be understood as the product of two parties – the OECD and the national government – pursuing particular self-interests. On the one hand, the MoE was inducted into normative notions of 'best practice' through subtle mechanisms such as socialization, networking and continuous negotiation. In the review itself, these notions were dressed as scientific, apolitical recommendations, much in the same way as benchmarking data has been used (Broome and Quirk 2015). Yet, the Dutch government commissioned the RNPE for specific reasons, and used the review strategically and selectively. By approbating the OECD's reputation as an independent education expert, issues that had become too sensitive, too contentious or too political at the domestic level, could be redirected into more 'technical' and 'impartial' channels. Rather than intentionally used to legitimate specific reforms or policies, peer reviews are desirable to help reframe the national education debate. This subtle steering mechanism may be particularly useful in decentralized contexts such as the Netherlands, where the government has restricted power over schools and boards. As such, in the absence of coercive instruments at its disposal, the institutional power of the OECD in the global governance scenario relies, to a great extent, on its capacity to construct, mediate and disseminate policy ideas, and in the legitimacy that national actors attribute to it in the enactment of such capacity.

Whilst maintaining overall control over the review, interview data reveals ongoing dialogue, ideas-sharing and negotiation between the OECD and MoE teams throughout the process. OECD reviewers were aware of the MoE's strategic commissioning of the review, yet welcomed their 'expert at will image' and appeared eager to help the

government explore and recalibrate its system. In this sense, the apparent malleability of the IO is central to its success. At times, even, this malleability extended beyond what MoE actors perceived as desirable. Yet, this relationship may be somewhat of a Dutch luxury, resulting from the OECD's respect for the 'good student' – well-aligned with the NPM and SAWA agendas. The fact that a background paper was not commissioned as a preliminary step, and that Dutch citizens were part of the review team also reflects the OECD's confidence in the Netherlands. In countries where this is not the case, the IO might adopt a harder, more patronizing approach (see for instance Echávarri and Peraza 2017). Yet, the adaptability of the RNPE should not be surprising. Autonomy and accountability solutions can be attached to a vast array of problems. Being only loosely coupled (or not coupled) to specific policy issues is a distinct advantage when it comes to promoting a particular policy agenda.

This SAWA agenda is evident throughout the review process and the report itself. It is promoted in key ways; through the use of (pressure-inducing) benchmarking data, through the problematization of policies considered ill-aligned with SAWA ideals, and through the report's main recommendations. These methods point to the underlying mechanism of multilateral surveillance: decentralization, standardization, and test-based accountability have become the 'rules of the game'. In the ways described, RNPEs appear to be an efficient means through which to enforce these rules and transfer normative notions of how educational systems should be organized and governed.

As suggested by Marcussen (2004), the impact of RNPE's on domestic policy can be difficult to determine, and reference to OECD documents and ideas does not necessarily mean that learning, or idea transfer has taken place. Unlike other research, which has focused on contexts where such reviews have had considerable impact – Norway (Steiner-Khamsi, Karseth, and Baek 2020) and Chile (Parcerisa and Falabella 2017) for example – direct policy impact of the 2016 Dutch review appears limited. Interestingly, according to respondents, the one area in which some policy change *was* reported to have occurred following the report, was the area that proved the most contentious during the review process – early childhood education. During the draft feedback stage, issues that were highlighted here seemed to come as a surprise to the MoE, and were seen as overly critical and suggestive of insufficient quality care provision. This possibly indicates that the influence of moral pressure (Drezner 2000), even 'shaming' (Marcussen 2004) is significant. We must also consider that the review was reported to not have delivered the fresh insights the MoE had hoped it would. As previous research has shown, if not interested in particular findings, the government might act to limit a report's dissemination (Verger, Fontdevila, and Parcerisa 2019). Whether or not this happened in the Netherlands is difficult to determine, yet one OECD member did express surprise at the fact that other important reports and significant policy news were also released on RNPE launch day.

A lack of immediate policy reform however does not mean that the review lacked its uses. Findings show the RNPE was used in several ways by the MoE, including for retrospective policy justification, and reframing and redirecting 'undesirable' sentiments. Given time, its use may also be seen in the reemerging discussions on standardized testing, and the early student streaming system. It is worth noting that not all governments may be able to use RNPE to their advantage in this way. As a well-performing system, with strong institutions and a history of conducting its own rigorous research,

the Dutch MoE has the ability to make strategic and selective use of OECD recommendations. An educational system in a less developed economy, or an educational system perceived to be in crisis, may not have this privilege.

To conclude, the study shows that the OECD's capacity to influence national policy depends on indirect and diffuse forms of institutional power that rely on expert knowledge as well as on agenda- and norm-setting mechanisms. Through these mechanisms, whose enactment strongly relies on the socialization and networking between policy elites and experts, the OECD establishes the limits of educational debates and the types of problems that need to and can be addressed. Member countries are not passive receptors of this agenda. Countries, especially those that are better situated in the OECD system and whose policy perspective is aligned to that of the IO, actively contribute to co-construct the OECD agenda and to consolidate its international legitimacy. Policy reviews are, as has been shown, an empirical manifestation of this form of global governance in the making.

Notes

1. Since 2005, thematic reviews focusing on specific topics (teachers, early childhood education, immigrant education, evaluation policies ...) are also part of the OECD review portfolio (Istance 2011).
2. Source: authors with data from the OECD iLibrary.
3. See: [http://www.oecd.org/education/Flyer%20for%20Education%20Policy%20Advice%20and%20Implementation%202014%20\(2\).pdf](http://www.oecd.org/education/Flyer%20for%20Education%20Policy%20Advice%20and%20Implementation%202014%20(2).pdf).
4. See: [http://www.oecd.org/education/Flyer%20for%20Education%20Policy%20Advice%20and%20Implementation%202014%20\(2\).pdf](http://www.oecd.org/education/Flyer%20for%20Education%20Policy%20Advice%20and%20Implementation%202014%20(2).pdf).
5. Cf. <https://www.oecd.org/site/peerreview/peerpressurerelatedconcept.htm>. See also Paganì (2002).
6. This was done by moving the date of the end-test back, until after students had been selected into secondary education.
7. See the OECD's process here: [http://www.oecd.org/education/Flyer%20for%20Education%20Policy%20Advice%20and%20Implementation%202014%20\(2\).pdf](http://www.oecd.org/education/Flyer%20for%20Education%20Policy%20Advice%20and%20Implementation%202014%20(2).pdf).
8. the OECD's 'education policy committee'.
9. <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/schooladvies-en-eindtoets-basisschool/wets-voorstel-doorstroomtoetsen-po> last accessed on 12 June 2020.
10. <https://toekomstvanonsonderwijs.nl/dialoog/> last accessed on 15 June 2020.

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