CONSTRUCTING SCHOOL AUTONOMY WITH ACCOUNTABILITY AS A GLOBAL POLICY MODEL
A FOCUS ON OECD’S GOVERNANCE MECHANISMS

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decades, international organizations and the OECD in particular have played a key role in the dissemination of school accountability with autonomy (SAWA) reforms.

+ Prefigured by the policy repertoire advanced during the 80s >> emphasis on school effectiveness and approach to schools as key units of change.
+ Increasing levels of conceptual and theoretical elaboration on the potential of a series of policy tools:
  - External assessment
  - Accountability
  - School autonomy
  ... crystallizing in the SAWA policy model during the 2000s
+ In coherence with the New Public Management agenda promoted by the organization in a range of public sectors.

OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

Understanding the role and impact of the OECD in the international promotion and dissemination of SAWA reforms.

+ Theoretical framework: international organizations’ governance mechanisms
  - Martens & Jakobi’s (2010) categorization of governance mechanisms particularly relevant for OECD:
    - Data production
    - Policy evaluation
    - Idea generation
  + Empirical strategy: desk study relying on 2 main data sources:
    - Systematic literature review on processes of reform along the lines of SAWA.
    - Document analysis of OECD publications and working documents.

MAIN RESULTS

DATA GATHERING

+ Leading role in the collection and production of comparable education data as one of the most distinct features of the organization >> establishment of a wide range of data-intensive initiatives including PISA but also EAG or PIAAC.
+ Promotion of the SAWA repertoire through:
  - Sense of competition + “naming and shaming” dynamics triggered by frequent reliance on league tables
  - Greater appeal of outcome-oriented governance approach + policies allowing for a more accurate control of education results.
  - Incorporation of prognosis frames and recommendations in reports and press releases.
  - Reconfiguration of assessment frameworks at a national level >> adjustment to PISA structure, contents and standards.

POLICY EVALUATION

Extensive and well-established use of peer reviews as a privileged means to provide policy guidance >> Reliance on multilateral surveillance, socialization and indirect coercion as key drivers of change.

+ Country reviews as strategic to the advancement of SAWA through:
  - Identification of new policy problems.
  - Identification and sharing of policy solutions.
  - Internalization of causal and principled beliefs among decision-makers.
  - Effectiveness ultimately mediated by the interests of policy actors acting as gatekeepers.
+ National reviews published over the last decade emphasize two key principles:
  - From inputs to outcomes.
  - Need to instil an evaluation culture.
  - but recommendations on specific policy instruments remain more heterogeneous in nature – particularly in relation to the stakes attached to assessment.

IDEA GENERATION

Stimulation of policy/political debates between States and development of new policy goals and programs – leading to the dissemination of causal ideas (what works) and principled beliefs (what is acceptable): Strategic role in the advancement of the SAWA agenda through:

+ Different research and training initiatives with external experts and country representatives >> subsequently echoed in different knowledge products.
  - More recent initiatives more nuanced in their conclusions >> emphasis on formative assessments and multi-stakeholder accountability.
+ OECD officials’ role as advisors to countries in the context of education reforms.
+ SAWA recommendations featuring prominently within a range of products oriented at interpreting PISA results and other one-off publications.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The OECD role in policy transfer dynamics goes far beyond that of a neutral broker between States >> soft power mechanism prove influential – and can compensate for modest financial or legal instruments.

The effectiveness of governance mechanism depends on their capacity to open a policy window.

- OECD as an instrument constituency - theorizing policies and matching them to a wide range of contexts and problems.

Governance mechanisms over domestic policy should not be understood as a top-down process >> they frequently lend themselves to countries’ appropriation/instrumentalization as a consequence of their à la carte and interactive nature.

Methodological difficulties in assessing OECD’s influence on national policy-making >> key dynamics (socialization, persuasion, meaning-making exchanges) not readily observable at hindsight...