

The “Greek PISA” Project and policy diffusion: Exploring aspects of the Greek National Diagnostic Examinations from a Comparative Education perspective

Author: Antonia Samara

Abstract

Since May 2022 a new strategy concerning the assessment of the effectiveness of the educational system has been put to force in Greece concerning the evaluation of 6th and 9th grade students from selected schools across the country in language and mathematical skills. The project is called “National Diagnostic Examinations” but in public discourse is merely known as “Greek PISA”. In a highly centralized education system such as the Greek one, these exams have been communicated as a way to assess the systems effectiveness and identifying strengths and weaknesses based on data from the schools. In our paper, we aim to study the national diagnostic examinations implemented in the last two years in Greek education through the lenses of comparative education. The theoretical background of the paper relates to contemporary trends in comparative education, such as policy attraction and policy diffusion. Our basic assumption, inspired partially by the Greek media referring to the exams as “Greek PISA”, is that the National Diagnostic Examinations is a case of policy diffusion and localization of OECD’s PISA, and therefore introduces aspects accompanying the latter, such as governing by numbers.

Methodologically, the paper draws on content analysis of policy papers accompanying the institutionalization and implementation of the national examinations, as well as texts related to the implementation of the international PISA program. In this way we aim to analyze this new institution through the prism of dominant trends such as governing by numbers and the emphasis on quantitative data as evidence of quality in education.

More specifically, the paper starts from a theoretical presentation of the debate on international educational governance and the role of international organizations in shaping priorities and practices in education. It then presents a discussion of the rationale of governing by numbers in education, and in quantitative evaluation at the level of education systems. Specific extensive reference is made to the PISA program, its rationale, key assumptions and implications. In the last part of the paper, we present the context and the rationale of the diagnostic examinations in Greek education, thus seeking to highlight aspects of a new and not yet thoroughly studied strategy as an example of policy diffusion and adoption in the Greek educational landscape. Since the project of the Greek national diagnostic examinations is a new one, which has not yet been researched, we hope that our work on it would offer the field a new case study for transfer and translation of international trends in national contexts.

Key words: education governance, policy diffusion, policy by numbers, OECD PISA, Greek National Diagnostic Examinations, “Greek PISA”

Antonia Samara, The “Greek PISA” Project and policy diffusion: Exploring aspects of the Greek National Diagnostic Examinations from a Comparative Education perspective, *Global Comparative Education: Journal of the WCCES* (ISSN: 2522-7491), Vol. 9 Nos. 1&2, September 2025

Antonia Samara, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece

[Global Comparative Education](#) is an open-access journal published by WCCES and licensed under [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](#)

Introduction

In May 2022, a new and unprecedented assessment procedure was conducted for the first time in Greek education: students of the sixth primary and third secondary school of selected school units participated in a proficiency test in the subjects of Language and Mathematics. This was the institution of national examinations of a diagnostic nature that was repeated in May 2023 and which very soon became known in public discourse as 'Greek PISA' (see id. <https://www.kathimerini.gr/society/562366495/scholeia-allages-stin-elliniki-pisa/>), directly referring to the OECD international competition as a source of 'borrowing'.

In our paper, we are inspired by this adoption of the term 'Greek PISA' even by official statements of the Ministry of Education (<https://www.minedu.gov.gr/dimofili/52111-12-05-22-10-erotiseis-kai-apantiseis-gia-tin-elliniki-pisa-2>), in order to study national diagnostic examinations as a case of 'policy diffusion'. At the same time, we examine the option of institutionalising national examinations that can produce analytical quantitative data as an example of 'governing by numbers' (see Grek 2009, 2013) in the Greek case.

Our study is structured in two main parts: in the first part we theoretically approach the concepts of international educational governance, policy diffusion and governing by numbers. In the second part we critically and comparatively study documents of the PISA programme and documents accompanying the implementation and evaluation of national diagnostic examinations to highlight convergences and divergences.

Theoretical Background

International educational governance and the role of international organisations

The term governance refers to coordination, cooperation and the existence of a variety of mechanisms operating at different levels, without the necessary existence of a larger political force. Risvi & Lingard (2010) refer to processes of power beyond the nation state, in which multiple actors at different levels (global, national and local) are involved in the production and implementation of policies. Governance is seen as a new form of political processes, which is associated with the exercise of power by international and supranational governmental structures and relates to the sharing of responsibilities and capabilities (Rhodes, 1997). These structures contribute to the development of networks on the international scene, which are characterised by independent relationships, exchanges of know-how, the establishment of management rules and considerable autonomy from state authority. This is a model of inter-governance without government (see Rhodes 1997), which is implemented through formal and informal rules and regulations of political and social processes and enhances the ability of international organizations to develop, shape and influence policy priorities at the international level (Rosenau & Czempiel, 1992; Martens & Balzer, 2004).

And while the formulation and exercise of educational policy by nation states is not explicitly contested, 'the emergence and development of the educational policy of international organisations led to a gradual shift of interest in education from the nation state to the international community' (Tsaousis, 2007: 45). The educational policy of international organizations cannot be imposed directly on their member states. "But it can indirectly determine their national education policy [among other things] by creating a broader climate concerning the organisation, scope and functioning of education" (Tsaousis, 2007: 24-25). This way is primarily related to the production of a discourse, which, due to the power and influence of these organisations, emerges as a dominant discourse (see also policy as discourse, Ball 1993). The effect of policy as discourse is to shape a particular way of

Antonia Samara, The "Greek PISA" Project and policy diffusion: Exploring aspects of the Greek National Diagnostic Examinations from a Comparative Education perspective, *Global Comparative Education: Journal of the WCCES* (ISSN: 2522-7491), Vol. 9 Nos. 1&2, September 2025

Antonia Samara, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece

[Global Comparative Education](#) is an open-access journal published by WCCES and licensed under [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](#)

thinking and to limit the possibilities of different interpretation and thinking on the proposed policy directions, usually strengthening power structures. In this way, the educational policy of international organizations consists mainly in shaping a reality through the production of discourse, which contributes to the construction of a 'total ideology' (cf. Mannheim, 1960), a *Zeitgeist*, which in turn initiates the production of national policies (Samara 2021). Jakobi (2009) also refers to similar practices, referring to global policy processes in which international organisations play a catalytic role, usually proposing 'soft governance' supervisory procedures (Martens et al., 2010).

International organisations and policy diffusion

According to Berry & Berry (1990 in Gilandi & Wasserfallen 2019: 1246), policy diffusion as a process of interdependent policy production in which analysis focuses on 'external' determinants, while internal determinants are treated as control variables. The term refers to pressure for innovations in policy, which may come from beyond the state itself, through the diffusion of corresponding innovations from one government to another (Shipan & Volden 2008: 841). The same scholars distinguish four 'mechanisms' by which policy diffusion operates: learning, economic competition, imitation and coercion (Shipan & Volden 2008). Specifically, learning is related to the study of the effects and processes of a policy change from its implementation in other countries, economic competition is related to the expected results in terms of competitiveness, imitation is related to the adoption of policies not only because of the specific study of their effects but mainly because of the focus on the prestige of those who have already implemented the change and, finally, coercion is often related to the imposition of sanctions. Learning and imitation seem to be quite close, with the fundamental element that distinguishes one from the other is that in the case of learning, the focus is on the policy itself as action, while in the case of imitation the focus of the proponents of a policy change is on the actors. Jakobi (2012) characterizes international organizations as central nodes of policy diffusion, with both learning and imitation playing an important role in the case of locally introducing policies that emerge from the discourse of international organizations.

It also seems that both learning and imitation as mechanisms of policy diffusion are related to policy borrowing and especially to what more recent scholars of policy borrowing (see e.g. Phillips 1989, Phillips & Ochs 2003, Rappleye 2006) describe as 'attraction'. Attraction involves both the prerequisites for educational lending (impulses) and the search for potential examples to be adopted internationally (externalising potential) (Phillips & Ochs 2003). Impulses include, for example, the inadequacy of the existing system, or the need for greater competitiveness, or the inability of an educational institution to respond to possible socio-political and economic changes. It is all these conditions that turn an educational system or an educational institution to seek solutions within the international environment. (Phillips & Ochs 2003; Rappleye 2006).

To the above typology concerning educational lending and especially educational 'attraction', the context shaped by globalisation adds new aspects (Rappleye 2006). The main one concerns who is initiating the lending or the change (Steiner-Khamsi 2004), as the need for educational change is no longer promoted by national actors only, but mainly by international organisations and transnational structures. In this context, the transfer of discourse of international organisations plays a crucial role (Schriewer 2000).

Related to the concept of policy diffusion is that of policy transfer and policy translation. The term policy transfer refers to 'the movement from one context to another of an educational idea, policy or practice and the subsequent processes of translation, transformation and internalization' (Rappleye 2010: 59), with Cowen (2006: 566) elaborating further on above concepts.

Governing by numbers

The concept of governing by numbers refers primarily to the use of quantitative data to shape strong trends in education policy, mainly through quantitative evaluations/assessments, which may a. highlight (quantitatively proven) good practices or identify educational failures; b. draw attention to prominent examples of good evaluations; c. create conditions for crisis and justify the need for reform interventions by focusing on quantitative data.

An important contribution to the debate on the policy by numbers is the work of scholars (see, for example, Grek 2008, 2009, 2013; Lingard 2013, 2016), who highlight the logic of the governance of numbers by studying the impact of the OECD's PISA programme. It is related to the strong use of tools (e.g. indicators) and the whole matrix of performativity and control (audit culture) which is also linked to part of the discourse on quality. This tool utilisation matrix works by shaping national priorities and choices, and essentially contributes to the shift from government to governance and indeed as soft governance in the sense that it is a technology for producing self-managed subjects (Dean 1995). Grek (2009:25) states in this regard that "Policy instruments such as indicators and the whole audit and performance-monitoring nexus have become a significant element of the shift from government to the governance of national education systems through new institutional forms with the purpose of orienting relations between political society (via the administrative executive) and civil society (via its administered subjects)".

Shore & Wright (2015: 22) talk about reducing complex policy-making processes to simple numerical indicators and hierarchies that allow for control and easier management. At the heart of this process is a rather overconfidence in the value of statistical measurements as a guarantee of excellence, quality, value, effectiveness. As a result, a global industry of measurement, hierarchies and control has emerged which has developed around the idea of transparency, efficiency, quality improvement.

PISA as a powerful international example

PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) has been organised and supervised by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) since 2000. It is the first of the three major assessment programmes run by the Organisation, the second being the Teacher Assessment of Learning and Teacher Competences (TALIS) and the third the Assessment of Adult Competences (PIAAC). According to the OECD itself, PISA 'is an international study launched in 2000. It aims to evaluate education systems worldwide by assessing the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students in the participating countries/economies. Since 2000, more than 70 countries and economies have participated in PISA' (<https://www.oecd.org/pisa/aboutpisa.htm>). The programme assesses 15-year-olds' knowledge in language, mathematics and science, and from 2018 onwards, another horizontal competence, identified as global competence, has been added, which the organisation refers to as "the ability of students to test locally, global and intercultural issues, to engage in open and effective interaction with people from different cultures and to act for collective well-being and sustainable development" (<https://www.oecd.org/pisa/innovation/global-competence/>) and it has been characterized as the 'Olympic Games of Education' (Lingard 2016) due to its global impact.

Methodology

In this paper we use content analysis and discourse analysis on key papers produced a. by OECD for the PISA programme explaining the PISA rationale and b. by the Greek Ministry of Education and Institute of Educational Policy which refer to the rationale of the Diagnostic Examinations. The papers used in each category are presented in the table below:

Antonia Samara, The "Greek PISA" Project and policy diffusion: Exploring aspects of the Greek National Diagnostic Examinations from a Comparative Education perspective, *Global Comparative Education: Journal of the WCCES* (ISSN: 2522-7491), Vol. 9 Nos. 1&2, September 2025

Antonia Samara, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece

[Global Comparative Education](#) is an open-access journal published by WCCES and licensed under [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](#)

OECD	Greek Ministry of Education and Institute of Educational Policy
<p>OECD (1999). Measuring Students' Knowledge and Skills. A new framework for assessment. Paris: OECD</p> <p>OECD (2013), PISA 2012 Assessment and Analytical Framework: Mathematics, Reading, Science, Problem Solving and Financial Literacy, OECD Publishing. http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264190511-en</p> <p>OECD (2017), PISA 2015 Assessment and Analytical Framework: Science, Reading, Mathematic, Financial Literacy and Collaborative Problem Solving, OECD Publishing, Paris. https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264281820-2-en</p> <p>OECD (2019), PISA 2018 Assessment and Analytical Framework, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/b25efab8-en.</p> <p>OECD (2023), PISA 2022 Assessment and Analytical Framework, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/df90bf9c-en.</p>	<p>Matsaggouras, I., Apostolopoulos, K., Mouzakis, Ch., Mpiniari, L., Sofianopoulou, Ch., Stouraitis, K., Mitsi-Anagnostou, M., Zympidis, D., Giannikas, A. (2022). Theoretical Framework and Guide for Question Setting for National Diagnostic Examinations for Primary School 6th Grade Studens and Lower Secondary School 3rd Grade Studens. Athens: Institute of Educational Policy</p> <p>Law 4823/2023 “Upgrading the school, strengthening the teachers and other provisions. Governmental Gazette Issue (FEK) 136 A 3/8/21</p> <p>Ministerial Decision No. 16469/ΓΔ4. Conducting diagnostic examinations at national level for students in grade 6 of primary schools and grade 3 of secondary schools. Governmental Gazette Issue (FEK) 877B /25-2-2022</p> <p>Official ministerial press release 14/2/2022 Data based educational policy making for the first time – the Greek “PISA” begins https://www.minedu.gov.gr/rss/51397-14-02-23</p> <p>Official ministerial press release 12/5/2022 Questions and answers on the Greek PISA. https://www.minedu.gov.gr/dimofili/52111-12-05-22-10-erotiseis-kai-apantiseis-gia-tin-elliniki-pisa-2</p>

The PISA related documents have been selected according to the following criteria: a. they were official documents accompanying the PISA examinations, b. they presented the official rationale on the goals of the aforementioned examinations, and c. they include the framework of the first PISA exams and those of the last decade.

The National Diagnostic Examinations related documents used in this analysis are official documents produced by the Ministry of Education and the Institute of Educational Policy for the implementation of the examinations procedure during its first round in 2022.

The content analysis is aimed at pointing convergences and divergences in the rationale of both types of examinations. Furthermore, having in mind that PISA has long proceeded the Diagnostic Examinations and constitutes a strong international discourse in its own, we seek to highlight possible influences in the Greek discourse that could showcase a paradigm of policy diffusion.

OECD PISA related documents analysis

As mentioned above, we examine PISA related documents in order to investigate the rationale of the examination as it is officially narrated by OECD. In the documents accompanying PISA there is always an introductory chapter concerning the rationale of PISA exams. Since

Antonia Samara, The “Greek PISA” Project and policy diffusion: Exploring aspects of the Greek National Diagnostic Examinations from a Comparative Education perspective, *Global Comparative Education: Journal of the WCCES* (ISSN: 2522-7491), Vol. 9 Nos. 1&2, September 2025

Antonia Samara, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece

[Global Comparative Education](#) is an open-access journal published by WCCES and licensed under [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](#).

the first implementation there have been three distinctive points that PISA documents come back to every time. These consider a. the role of PISA as a monitoring mechanism that provides evidence for policy making, b. the outcome- rather than syllabus-oriented nature of the assessment procedure that decontextualizes it from national curricula and links it with human capital development and c. the large scale data and analysis concerning the evolution of outcomes over time and contextual indicators accompanying educational results that can form international trends.

Concerning the first point it is stated from the very beginning that “the primary reason for developing and conducting this large-scale international assessment is to provide empirically based information for policy-making” (OECD 1999: 7) as “OECD/PISA represents a new commitment by the governments of OECD countries to monitor the outcomes of education systems in terms of student achievement, within a common framework that is internationally agreed” (OECD 1999: 7). It therefore seeks to contribute through comparative international analysis that can “extend and enrich the national picture by establishing the levels of performance being achieved by students in other countries and by providing a larger context within which to interpret national results.” (OECD 1999: 7). A decade later the discourse remains the same as OECD (2013: 13) claims that PISA “aims to provide a new basis for policy dialogue and for collaboration in defining and implementing educational goals, in innovative ways that reflect judgments about the skills that are relevant to adult life”. In future documents this contribution to empirically based information for policy making is also stated in OECD (2023:11; 2017:12): “Policymakers around the world use PISA findings to gauge the knowledge and skills of the students in their own country/economy compared with those in other participating countries/economies, establish benchmarks for improvements in the education provided and/or in learning outcomes, and understand the relative strengths and weaknesses of their own education systems.”. The fact of policy orientation keeps recurring in the documents discourse (OECD 2017:12; 2019: 13).

It is significant that from the very beginning of PISA's implementation the OECD has been oriented towards the development of competences in the logic of a dynamic lifelong learning model (OECD 1999:9). Therefore, it seeks to assess acquired knowledge and skills that are “not primarily in terms of a common denominator of national school curricula but in terms of what skills are deemed to be essential for future life” (OECD 1999:11), that is that they are related to human capital and lifelong learning (OECD 1999, 2013), as knowledge and skills “embodied in individuals that are relevant to personal, social and economic well-being.” (OECD 1999: 11). The document states precisely that “OECD/PISA examines the degree of preparedness of young people for adult life and, to some extent, the effectiveness of education systems. Its ambition is to assess achievement in relation to the underlying objectives (as defined by society) of education systems, not in relation to the teaching and learning of a body of knowledge” (OECD 1999:11). PISA documents come back to this point stressing that PISA is “moving beyond the school-based approach towards the use of knowledge in tasks and challenges likely to be encountered in home and work life outside school” (OECD 2013: 13) or that “[t]he assessment does not just ascertain whether students can reproduce knowledge; it also examines how well students can extrapolate from what they have learned and can apply that knowledge in unfamiliar settings, both in and outside of school. This approach reflects the fact that modern economies reward individuals not for what they know, but for what they can do with what they know.” (OECD 2019: 11).

Furthermore, OECD stresses the regularity of PISA outcomes that “will make it possible for countries to regularly and predictably monitor their progress in meeting key learning objectives.” OECD 1999:11), as well as that the “assessments will provide ... basic indicators providing a baseline profile of the knowledge and skills of students; contextual indicators,

showing how such skills relate to important demographic, social, economic and educational variables; indicators on trends that will emerge from the on-going, cyclical nature of the data collection and that will show changes in outcome levels, changes in outcome distributions and changes in relationships between student-level and school-level background variables and outcomes over time.” (OECD 1999:10; OECD 2013: 16; OECD 2019:11; 2023:11). It is claimed that “over the longer term, will lead to the development of a body of information for monitoring trends in the knowledge and skills of students in various countries as well as in different demographic subgroups of each country.” (OECD 2017:12). Therefore, in 2022 complementary questionnaires were distributed, concerning computer familiarity, parental perceptions and involvement and teacher training and professional development (OECD 2023: 17)

It is interesting that not much has changed in the rationale of PISA since 2000. The same arguments have been repeatedly noticed as far as its goals and methods are concerned. Academics as Lingard (2013) state that the agency utilises policy research rather than academic policy research, while Martens (2007) supports the idea that the PISA examinations mark the comparative turn in which the OECD has claimed global recognition at the level of expertise. The PISA assessments have helped to form a global education policy field by capturing the world as a measurement space (Lingard & Rawolle, 2011), having largely influenced the way we internationally perceive student performance (Sjøberg 2019). Wiseman (2010: 8) notes that what the widely available data on education has done is to create a space of intelligibility in which the production of educational policy is not geographically or politically defined but is instead defined by the range of evidence that has been drawn upon to support one decision or another.

Greek National Diagnostic Examinations Document Analysis

The national diagnostic examinations were conducted for the first time in May 2022, and they quickly obtained the nickname “Greek PISA”, both by the Press and by the Ministry of Education itself. These are annual examinations in which students in the 6th grade and the 6th grade of primary and secondary school in selected schools in the country participate and are tested on their knowledge and skills in Language and Mathematics. The examinations are an unprecedented project for Greek education, coordinated and conducted by the Ministry of Education under the scientific supervision of the Institute of Educational Policy.

Approximately 12000 pupils from 600 primary and secondary schools (300 primary and 300 secondary schools) participated in the diagnostic examinations (see MD 46075/GD4/19-4-22). The selection of was made by a Scientific Committee using stratified sampling, in order to reach a representative sample of all schools in the country, and to include pupils attending various educational environments. The examinations are anonymous and the results are announced by Regional Directorates of Education and not by school unit.

According to official ministerial documents accompanying the implementation of national diagnostic examinations, there are two key points concerning a. the proclaimed goal, b. the scientific approach followed and the nature of the examined knowledge and skills.

The goal of the Diagnostic examinations, which are linked to the educational system assessment, is described in the article 104 of the Law 4823/2021 – FEK 136 A 3/8/21 as follows: “the goal of the aforementioned examination is to reach to conclusions about the implementation of curricula and the educational results achieved at a national, a regional and a school level”. The following year the goal of national examinations is further elaborated in the Ministerial Decision 16469/GD4 FEK 877B/25-02-2022 where it is stated that “[t]hey aim to assess the abilities of students in the sixth grade of primary school and the third grade of secondary school, i.e. students at the end of primary and the end of compulsory education.

Antonia Samara, The “Greek PISA” Project and policy diffusion: Exploring aspects of the Greek National Diagnostic Examinations from a Comparative Education perspective, *Global Comparative Education: Journal of the WCCES* (ISSN: 2522-7491), Vol. 9 Nos. 1&2, September 2025

Antonia Samara, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece

[Global Comparative Education](#) is an open-access journal published by WCCES and licensed under [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](#)

The declared objective is to draw conclusions on the progress of the implementation of the Curricula and the degree of achievement of the expected learning outcomes, with the aim of providing a valid and reliable assessment of students' knowledge, competences and skills.” (p.8689-8690). Furthermore, it is expected that “the results of the diagnostic examinations are used by the A.I.P.P.D.E. and the I.E.P. for the formulation of recommendations to the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, for proposals for improvements in the Curricula, in the educational material, in the teaching methodology, for approaches to inclusive and compensatory education, as well as for the development of focused training activities” (p. 8690).

Following the legislative framework, the Scientific Committee that undertook the task to carry out the examinations, published a theoretical framework further elaborating on the goal and the scientific approach towards the implementation of such a national testing. In that theoretical framework the goal is re-confirmed as that the “main purpose is to investigate the extent to which the objectives set out in the curricula are achieved, to identify the variety of difficulties faced by students and, on the basis of these, to organise, among other things, the necessary interventions both for the improvement of curricula and textbooks and for the support of teachers, students and schools, as detailed in the aforementioned Ministerial Decision.” (Matsaggouras et al 2022: 9), while in both official ministerial releases (14/2/2022 and 15/5/2022) the goal is further redefined as an attempt for data based policy making in education.

Concerning the scientific focus of the examinations, all official documents clearly state that it is mainly syllabus-based, linking it directly with the level of achievement according to the the Greek curricula. In the Ministerial Decision 16469/GD4 FEK 877B/25-02-2022 (p.8690) it is stated “They focus specifically on the valid and reliable diagnosis of knowledge, skills and abilities of students in the areas of Language - Reading Comprehension and Mathematics, in accordance with the expected learning outcomes, as indicated or described in the relevant Curricula”. The exact same words are used in the Official ministerial release of 14/2/2011. This is further explained in the official theoretical framework (p.8, 11) where it is clearly stated that the examinations are syllabus based, making a clear distinction from theory-based examinations. “It is obvious that the "diagnostic examinations" in primary and secondary schools, as provided by the law 4823/2021, clearly belong to the second category (syllabus-based), as they highlight which and to what extent the aims of the statutory curriculum are expressed as student knowledge, abilities and skills and which of these have not been understood to the expected extent by a smaller or larger number of students.” (Matsaggouras et al. 2022: 11).

Syllabus-based diagnostic examinations can lead to highlighting the convergences and divergences of student outcomes compared to the objectives of the curricula as they are further elaborated in school books. Therefore they allow interventions vis a vis the cognitive objectives of the curricula, the structure and contents of school books as well as teaching, learning and evaluative approaches used in classrooms (Matsaggouras et al. 2022: 13-15). The official ministerial release (12/5/2022) notes that “the examinations subjects will be familiar to students, following the school books and what they have already been taught through the years. The National Diagnostic examinations do not intend to surprise students with questions that they have never dealt with before”.

Finally, concerning the analysis of data the ministry aims at an analysis on a regional base that “will provide useful information regarding the identification and orientation of the interventions to be followed, in particular on ways of managing and overcoming the causes of learning and development difficulties” in the examined areas. in the areas of language,

knowledge and thinking” (<https://iep.edu.gr/el/theoritiko-plaisio-eedx-menu/synoptiki-perigrifi-theoritikoy-plaisiou-ethnikon-diagnostikon-eksetaseon>).

In the press, sources of the Ministry of Education linked the diagnostic examinations to educational quality, stating that "we are creating a new, independent tool for the assessment of the quality of educational work and its continuous upgrading" (<https://www.kathimerini.gr/society/561650947/chtizetai-i-elliniki-pisa/>). At the same time, public discourse was subject to strong, though not extensive, criticism. The examinations were described as a 'quack PISA' (Mavrogiorgos 2022) and criticism focused mainly on the disregard of the specific local and social context of schools and the risk of ranking schools according to the performance of their pupils in national diagnostic examinations. At the same time, concern was expressed about the possible orientation of schools towards the targeted achievement of high scores in national diagnostic examinations to the detriment of the overall educational and pedagogical work or other activities.

Comparative approach

The very use of the term “Greek PISA” shows a clear connection of National Diagnostic Examinations with the OECD PISA both in symbolic as well as in a pragmatic level. The use of the term “Greek PISA” was primarily adapted by the Greek Ministry of Education in order to communicate the project to the press and the public discourse as it has been used both in Ministerial Officers interviews in media, and by Official Ministerial Releases. This leads us to connect the Greek PISA project with policy diffusion in terms of it being a peripheral adaptation of a strong international project, led by a first line international organization such as the OECD. The very use of the term Greek PISA on behalf of official ministerial authorities is implying a reference to a high prestige international project the quality of which is expected to reflect on the venture attempted locally. We could characterize it a case of policy diffusion merely in the level of imitation (see Shipan & Volden 2008) and maybe also at the learning level, since a series of convergencies between the two projects can be identified.

The first and maybe most important convergence has to do with the aim of collecting data for future policy decisions (data based policy making). Both examinations seek to derive data that can be of use for policy decisions, pointing out strengths and weaknesses with the use of large numerical data, that are easily read. However, PISA can also provide comparative data among a number of countries that can also reach to national comparative analyses and reveal geographical/cultural and evolutionary trends. They can also instigate discourses on policy borrowing from high achieving countries. The National Diagnostic Examinations can also provide data for comparisons among regions and maybe schools, although this is not yet activated through the legal framework (it has however been a point of critique by opponents, claiming that the project will lead to school stratification (Mavrogiorgos 2022)¹. The attempt to derive statistical data in order to take political decisions in education is partially connected to the notion of governing by numbers, like it is for OECD PISA.

Furthermore, both examinations are claiming at aiming to test students skills and applied knowledge in a perspective of lifelong learning. However, what constitutes a great difference between them are the different approaches towards what is being tested: OECD PISA is decontextualized and clearly theory-based, expecting to measure what 15year olds are expected to know, regardless whether it has been acquired in school or in non-academic

¹ The Greek education system is a highly centralized one, with very few differentiations among schools and regions. There is an on-going discourse about moving towards a level of decentralizations, which is highly opposed by part of the society and the educational community. Antonia Samara, The “Greek PISA” Project and policy diffusion: Exploring aspects of the Greek National Diagnostic Examinations from a Comparative Education perspective, *Global Comparative Education: Journal of the WCCES* (ISSN: 2522-7491), Vol. 9 Nos. 1&2, September 2025

Antonia Samara, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece

[Global Comparative Education](#) is an open-access journal published by WCCES and licensed under [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](#)

context. The Greek National Diagnostic Examinations on the contrary are clearly syllabus-based, seeking to measure the level of mastery of the curricula.

In any case, both represent projects contributing to the educational governance, in the sense that a. they can potentially fuel public discourse on education, initiating or supporting initiate calls for reform or can legalize reforms on the basis of the data they can provide. Furthermore, the national diagnostic examinations localize a practice developed by an international organization in a case that can be linked to processes of translation and transformation of educational practices (see Cowen 2006).

References

1. Ball, S. (1993). What is Policy? Texts, Trajectories and Toolboxes. *Discourse*. Vol. 13, No. 2, pp. 10-17
2. Cowen, R. (2006). Acting comparatively upon the educational world: puzzles and possibilities. *Oxford Review of Education*, 32(5), 561-573
3. Dean, M. (1995). Governing the unemployed self in an active society. *Economy and Society*, Volume 24, Number 4, 559-83
4. Gilardi, F., Wasserfallen, F. (2019). The politics of policy diffusion. *European Journal of Political Research* 58: 1245–1256, doi: 10.1111/1475-6765.12326
5. Grek, S. (2008). From Symbols to Numbers: The shifting technologies of education governance in Europe. *European Educational Research Journal*. Volume 7 Number 2 <http://dx.doi.org/10.2304/eerj.2008.7.2.208>
6. Grek, S. (2013). Expert moves: international comparative testing and the rise of expertocracy, *Journal of Education Policy*, 28(5), pp.695-709.
7. Grek, S. (2009). Governing by numbers: the PISA ‘effect’ in Europe, *Journal of Education Policy*, 24:1, 23-37, DOI: 10.1080/02680930802412669
8. <https://iep.edu.gr/el/theoritiko-plaisio-eedx-menu/synoptiki-perigrifi-theoritikoy-plaisiou-ethnikon-diagnostikon-eksetaseon>
9. https://iep.edu.gr/images/eedx/2021-2022/apotelesmata/%CE%94%CE%A4_%CE%95%CE%95%CE%94%CE%A7_12-07-2022.pdf
10. <https://www.kathimerini.gr/society/561650947/chtizetai-i-elliniki-pisa/>
11. <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/aboutpisa.htm>
12. <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/innovation/global-competence/>
13. Jakobi, A. P. (2009). International organizations and world society: studying global policy development in public policy, *TranState Working Papers*, No. 81, Universität Bremen, Collaborative Research Center 597 - Transformations of the State, Bremen
14. Jakobi, A., P. (2012). Facilitating Transfer: International Organizations as Central Nodes for Policy Diffusion. In Steiner-Khamsi, G., Waldow, F. (eds). *Policy Borrowing and Lending in Education*. World Yearbook of Education. Routledge
15. Law 4823/2023 “Upgrading the school, strengthening the teachers and other provisions.” *Governmental Gazette Issue (FEK)* 136 A 3/8/21
16. Lingard, B. (2013). The impact of research on education policy in an era of evidence-based policy, *Critical Studies in Education*, 54:2, 113-131, DOI: 10.1080/17508487.2013.781515
17. Lingard, B. (2016). Rationales for and Reception of OECD’S PISA. *Educ. Soc., Campinas*, v. 37, n°. 136, p.609-627 DOI: 10.1590/ES0101-73302016166670
18. Lingard, B., Rawolle, S. (2011). New scalar politics: implications for education policy. *Comparative Education*, 47: 4, 489-502, DOI: 10.1080/03050068.2011.555941
19. Mannheim, K. (1960). *Ideology and Utopia. An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*. London. Routledge & Kegan Paul
20. Martens, K. & Balzer, C. (2004). Comparing Governance of International Organizations - The EU, the OECD and Educational Policy. Paper presented to the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR): *International Organizations and Policy Implementation*, Uppsala, Sweden.
21. Martens, K. (2007). How to Become an Influential Actor – The ‘Comparative Turn’ in OECD Education Policy. In Martens, K., Rusconi, A., Leuze, K. (eds). *New Arenas of Education Governance. The Impact of International Organizations and Markets on Educational Policy Making*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan
22. Matsaggouras, I., Apostolopoulos, K., Mouzakis, Ch., Mpiniari, L., Sofianopoulou, Ch., Stouraitis, K., Mitsi-Anagnostou, M., Zypidis, D., Giannikas, A. (2022). Theoretical Framework and Guide for Question Setting for National Diagnostic Examinations for

Antonia Samara, The “Greek PISA” Project and policy diffusion: Exploring aspects of the Greek National Diagnostic Examinations from a Comparative Education perspective, *Global Comparative Education: Journal of the WCCES* (ISSN: 2522-7491), Vol. 9 Nos. 1&2, September 2025

Antonia Samara, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece

[Global Comparative Education](#) is an open-access journal published by WCCES and licensed under [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](#)

- Primary School 6th Grade Students and Lower Secondary School 3rd Grade Students. Athens: Institute of Educational Policy [in Greek]
23. Mavrogiorgos, G. (2022). PISA/OECD and the Greek “quack” PISA https://www.alfavita.gr/ekpaideysi/374286_pisa/oosa-kai-i-kompogiannitiki-elliniki-pisa
 24. Ministerial Decision No. 16469/ΓΔ4 (2022). Conducting diagnostic examinations at national level for students in grade 6 of primary schools and grade 3 of secondary schools. Governmental Gazette Issue FEK 877B /25-3-2022
 25. OECD (1999). *Measuring Students’ Knowledge and Skills. A new framework for assessment*. Paris: OECD
 26. OECD (2013). *PISA 2012 Assessment and Analytical Framework: Mathematics, Reading, Science, Problem Solving and Financial Literacy*, OECD Publishing. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264190511-en>
 27. OECD (2017). *PISA 2015 Assessment and Analytical Framework: Science, Reading, Mathematic, Financial Literacy and Collaborative Problem Solving*, OECD Publishing, Paris. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264281820-2-en>
 28. OECD (2019). *PISA 2018 Assessment and Analytical Framework*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/b25efab8-en>.
 29. OECD (2023). *PISA 2022 Assessment and Analytical Framework*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/df0bf9c-en>.
 30. Official ministerial press release 12/5/2022 Questions and answers on the Greek PISA. <https://www.minedu.gov.gr/dimofili/52111-12-05-22-10-erotiseis-kai-apantiseis-gia-tin-elliniki-pisa-2>
 31. Official ministerial press release 14/2/2022 Data based educational policy making for the first time – the Greek “PISA” begins <https://www.minedu.gov.gr/rss/51397-14-02-23>
 32. Pasiar, G. & Samara, A. (2021). European educational governance: policy learning and the teaching profession, in: Sidiropoulos, S., Tzagkarakis, S. I. & Kritas, D. (eds), *Europe at the Crossroads: Leadership, Challenges and State of Play*, Proceedings of the 1st POLITEIA International Conference, Hellenic Association of Political Scientists: Athens, pp. 297-309
 33. Pasiar, G. (2016). Governance, global education agenda and the role of international organizations. In Fassoulis, K, Roussakis, Y., Samara, A. Fyrippis, E. Pasiar, G. (eds) *Tracing the educational landscape*. Athens: Papazisis Publications, pp. 69-90 [in Greek]
 34. Phillips, D. & Ochs, K. (2003). Processes of Policy Borrowing in Education: some explanatory and analytical devices, *Comparative Education*, 39:4, pp. 451-461
 35. Phillips, D. (1989). Neither a Borrower nor a Lender Be? The Problems of Cross-national Attraction in Education, *Comparative Education*, 25:3, 267-274, DOI: 10.1080/0305006890250302
 36. Rappleye, J. (2006). Theorizing Educational Transfer: toward a conceptual map of the context of cross-national attraction. *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 1:3, 223-240
 37. Rappleye, J. (2010). *Compasses, Maps and Mirrors. Relocating Episteme(s) of Transfer, Reorienting the Comparative Kosmos*. M.A. Larsen (ed.). *New thinking in Comparative Education. Honouring Robert Cowen*. Sense Publishers
 38. Rhodes, R.A.W. (1997). The New Governance: Governing without Government. *Political Studies*, Vol. 44, Issue 4, pp. 652-667 <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.1996.tb01747.x>
 39. Rhodes, R.A.W. (2007). Understanding Governance: Ten Years On. *Organization Studies* 28:8, 1243-1264
 40. Risvi, F. & Lingard, B. (2010). *Globalizing Education Policy*. Abingdon: Routledge
 41. Rosenau, J. & Czempiel, E. (1992). *Governance without Government: Order and Change in World Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

42. Samara, A. (2013). Lifelong learning as a factor of ideological and institutional change of the modern university. PhD Dissertation. NKUA [in Greek]
43. Samara, A. (2021). Education governance in the era of lifelong learning: The construction of the lifelong learning teacher. In V. Chiou, L. Geunis, O. Holz, Oruç Ertürk, F. Sheldon (eds). *Voices from the Classroom: A Celebration of Learning*. Vol. 1. Münster: Waxmann, pp. 307-317
44. Samara, A. (2024). Educational system assessment and international educational governance: the national diagnostic examination as “policy diffusion” and “governing by numbers”. 12th Panhellenic Conference of the Greek Pedagogical Society [in Greek]
45. Schriewer, J. (ed) (2000). *Discourse Formation in Comparative Education*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang
46. Shipan, Ch. R., Volden, C. (2008). The Mechanisms of Policy Diffusion. *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 52, No. 4, pp. 840-857
47. Shore, C., Wright, S. (2015). Governing by numbers: audit culture, rankings and the new world order. *Social Anthropology*, 23: 22–28. doi: 10.1111/1469-8676.12098.
48. Sjøberg, S. (2019). The PISA-syndrome – How the OECD has hijacked the way we perceive pupils, schools and education. *Confero*, Vol. 7, no. 1, pp.12-65 doi:10.3384/confero.2001-4562.190125
49. Steiner-Khamsi, G. (Ed.). (2004). *The global politics of educational borrowing and lending*. Teachers College Press.
50. Tsaousis, D. (2007). The education policy of international organizations. *Global and European dimensions*. Athens: Gutenberg [in Greek]
51. Wiseman, A. W. (2010). The Uses of Evidence for Educational Policymaking: Global Contexts and International Trends. *Review of Research in Education*, 34(1), 1-24. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X09350472>