

The status of PISA in the relationship between civil society and the educational sector in French-speaking Belgium

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ABSTRACT:

This paper examines how PISA surveys have been received and employed in French-speaking Belgium. Our analysis has a simple structure: It involves studying the application of highly specific instrument to a context whose particular characteristics have been forged over time. After pointing out the historically specific attributes of consociational politics in Belgium, and the traditionally modest place of knowledge in the making of public policy (Mangez, 2009, n.d.), we will focus on the PISA instrument. What kind of instrument is it? Does it resemble a mechanism of the Evaluative State, that is, is it an instrument useful in decision-making? Alternatively, does it perhaps constitute an instrument required for surveillance in the way Rosanvallon (2006) uses the term? Perhaps should we view it as an instrument facilitating soft regulation? We will compare each of these propositions with our empirical observations. Unlike the official position, which views PISA as an instrument supporting decision-making, our findings indicate that the instrument — at least in the context of French-speaking Belgium — tends instead to function as a monitoring instrument that increases the pressure of the quasi-market on actors (public and private) in the educational sector. According to this analysis, the State should not be viewed solely as an evaluative State; it must also be evaluated, ranked and compared to other purveyors of educational services, both Belgian and foreign. The analysis prompts us to propose a new concept, that of “third-party evaluator”, which could enrich and refine analysis of the role of knowledge in public policy.

KEYWORDS:

Third-party evaluator, Consociation, Surveillance, PISA.

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INTRODUCTION

The present paper explores the role of formal knowledge in the formulation of public policy in the educational sector. Our empirical focus is the OECD program devoted to evaluating the experience of 15-year-old students in OECD member countries and certain associated countries, and known by its acronym, PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment).

A number of researchers have taken an interest in this research, commenting on its findings, conducting secondary analysis or pointing out methodological or cultural biases. We, by contrast, analyse the role played by this mechanism in the sphere of educational policy in the French Community of Belgium (FCB). The structure of our analysis is simple involves studying the application of highly specific instrument to a context whose particular characteristics have been forged over time.

Instruments (in this case, public policy instruments) foster a certain way of organising relationships among actors or players (citizens and those who govern them, organised players, users...), and a way of perceiving the world in which the players interact (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2005). The form of the instrument, the way it works and its distinctive rationality are, at once, the driving force behind — and the result of — social relationships: instruments promote, sometimes implicitly, a particular way of organising a player's actions and interactions. The relationship between the State and civil society is no exception.

One should not ascribe too much (hypothetical) power to these instruments. While it is true that they are never neutral, and that they encourage a certain worldview, they are only a potential influence. In practice, the instruments always form part of a historically determined environment. Consequently, political and institutional environments merit particular attention. One cannot understand the application of PISA surveys in — and their adoption by — a given environment without understanding the institutional actors in this environment, and the history and structure of their relationships. The social and political significance of an instrument such as PISA is context-specific and historically determined. Moreover, the historical context may evolve.

The analytical framework designed to analyse the role and status of PISA consists in viewing this role as the interaction between a context (historically determined, and in which there exists a system of relationships among actors, values and customs, etc.) and an instrument conveying a specific rationality, which is itself affected by a system of relationships among actors, values and ways of doing things.

THE CONTEXT: THE PISA SURVEYS AND EDUCATIONAL POLICY IN THE FRENCH-SPEAKING COMMUNITY IN BELGIUM

To understand how an instrument such as PISA acquires or fails to acquire significance in a given

context, it is essential to consider the political culture specific to the context in question. Obviously, public policy is not created in the same way in all European countries. For example, we will demonstrate that, from several standpoints, the way public policy is created in en Belgium is diametrically opposite to the approach taken in France. The different forms and methods of policy-making must be fully taken into account to analyse the instruments and the role they play in different national contexts.

HISTORICITY OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE STATE AND SOCIETY

The objective of the first section is to document the distinctive characteristics of the Belgian environment and political culture, first, as revealed by their long history and, second, by identifying recent changes. This does not involve embarking on a systematic description of political institutions in the landscape of French-speaking Belgium (FSB) but, rather, revealing its political culture, which includes its approaches, customs, and even the political *habitus* that develops within it. Traditionally, how has public policy in Belgium been formed?

To answer this question, we must go back in time. Belgian political culture has a long history. We know that one of the main prerequisites making it possible for Belgium to exist as a Nation-State involved drawing up a fundamental agreement, in 1830-1831, between two communities (one Catholic, the other anticlerical) that had refused to live together unless they were granted certain freedoms (especially regarding the ways they organised their respective communities) (Mabille, 2000). This founding act established the basis for a specific relationship between, on the one hand, the State and “organised civil society” (Reman, 2002) and, on the other hand, the different communities that lived in their midst. In a variety of sectors, therefore, Belgium gradually structured itself around different “pillars” (Seiler, 1997). However, it turned out that the service sectors (education¹, health, recreation...) were more successful than the less personalised sectors (finance, energy...) (Vanderstraeten, 2002). While the pillars clearly lost some of their institutional solidity, and while it is just as clear that today we are witnessing a form of dissociation between the organisations

themselves and their sociological bases (De Munck, 2002), the fact remains that they gave a certain substance and consistency to Belgian political culture.

Historically, this culture was based on the principle that it was necessary to discover approaches allowing different groups to live together, while preserving their autonomy, at least in part. Examples of approaches that facilitated co-existence in a fragmented society included proportional (rather than majority) representation, the granting and supporting of a measure of autonomy for organised collective actors (especially through constitutional freedoms), public financing of these collective actors’ structured activities when the latter were considered to be in the public interest (for example, based on the principle of *liberté subsidiée*², the negotiation of different types of “pacts” (educational, cultural, relating to associations) meant to guarantee a sharing of social and symbolic power. Thus, the Belgian government defined their relationship with organised civil society as a “complementary” relationship. This way of looking at relationships between the State and society, which is diametrically opposite to the French model, must be taken into account in analysing the relationship between knowledge and policy.

Democratic cohabitation of different communities on the same territory can only be achieved in certain conditions, namely, those associated with consociative democracy (Bakvis, 1985; Lijphart, 1979). Public policy making in this type of democracy has several characteristics, which have been clearly identified by various Belgian political and social analysts.

First, in general, the State — or, more broadly, the public authorities — is comparatively weak and “placed in a position of subordination relative to organised civil society” (De Munck, 2002, p. 102; translator’s translation — TT). Second, the relevant knowledge associated with most areas of public policy is not found within official State administrations (De Munck, 2002). Third, the autonomy of the various organised actors is significant; in fact, it is the dominant force when no inter-segmental agreement is concluded (Seiler, 1997). Lastly, public policies are created “bottom up” through the forging of inter-segmental compromises among established actors (Dumont & Delgrange, 2008).

In a recent article, Dumont and Delgrange (2008) provided a good summary of certain features of the democratic model in Belgium, among other things by pointing out the way it contrasts with the French model. The French republican model is a “single-culture” model: “it is based on a decisive top-down movement, from the State to society, from policy to culture” (p. 82). In Belgium, on the other hand, “instead of proceeding downward, from the State to society, political culture is forged at the grassroots level, from a multiplicity of religious, ideological and regional traditions, and then proceeds upwards to policy and the State. [...] The] social and political realities of the Belgian system of public decision making are based overwhelmingly on the logic of negotiation and compromise” (pp. 82-83) [TT]. Dumont and Delgrange explain much about political culture in Belgium by pointing out that it is created at the “grassroots level”. However, in this matter is critical to point out that the “grassroots” in question consists of quasi-institutionalised groups, that is, a sphere of organised civil society that must be differentiated from citizens themselves. The key feature of this type of democratic model derives from the status accorded to the organised actors located “between” the government and individual citizens. In this model, citizens are *represented* by their elites, who are the heads of organisations (hospitals, unions, universities, schools...): they *rely* on them, from cradle to grave; they *belong* to a “world” to which they remain steadfast. Aside from electoral power, the ability of individual citizens to evaluate, control or discipline organised actors and authorities (i.e. their *élites*) is extremely weak, and there are hardly any instruments providing support for this purpose.

THE NEED FOR DISCRETION

The Belgian approach to creating peaceful coexistence among groups includes the principle of discretion. The need for discretion should not be viewed as a form of over-cautiousness concerning the “disclosure” of knowledge that could put someone in danger. Rather, it is a way of life; one could almost say that in the consociative context it combines, both in reality and potentially, a form of good sense or diplomacy with basic political utility: it puts the segmental autonomy into action while establishing the

potential for inter-segmental compromise. Thus, the concept of discretion has a double meaning here. It involves (a) leaving a certain number of choices to the discretion of the organised actors (thereby guaranteeing their autonomy in practice) and (b) not meddling in the affairs of one’s neighbours (thereby making a potential compromise possible). The need for discretion also pervades the relationship between individuals and the *élites* representing them.

Socio-historically, the features of French-speaking Belgium’s politics and institutions, which were shaped over a long period, have not tended to create assessment mechanisms, or provide assessment results, of whatsoever description. A number of factors help us to understand the specific link between its political and cognitive spheres. First, until recently no institutional actor had really been in a legitimate position to evaluate the entire system or set up other types of joint instruments covering the entire territory (course programs, inspection units, etc.). In addition, in a consociational context, where the creation of the norm requires complex transactions, compromises and equilibriums, “objectified” knowledge does not necessarily facilitate the political decision-making process. Stated differently, in a consociational context, we may hypothesise that knowledge presented in an objectified form does not have strong or *a priori* political utility. On the contrary, it seems that consociational contexts do not favour the use of evidence-based policy models. Also, given that in consociational contexts all actors are involved in transactions amongst themselves, it is difficult to determine which of them should be entrusted with the objectification process (unless one forms committees on which the different interests are represented). All production of knowledge by the actors involved in the political process is almost perforce “situated” and context-specific (i.e., specific to the context of a university, model, pillar, party, etc.).

These various factors allow us to understand why Belgium’s political actors (“political” in the broad sense) traditionally make only limited use of statistical data. Indeed, an expert and complete command of statistical data is not an essential element of policy construction. The latter is usually the upshot of transactions, compromises and arrangements not based on objective rationality but, rather, on the ability to generate compromises that

will not necessarily be bolstered by the “evidence” of objective data. It may be necessary to sacrifice consistency when there is a need to satisfy different, potentially divergent, interests.

Similarly, Varone and Jacob (2004, p. 288) point out that “evaluation tends to be more institutionalised in majority-based democracies (based on either the Westminster or presidential system) rather than on democracies based on so-called consensus, negotiation or agreement” (TT). The development of public-policy evaluation is achieved more slowly and with greater difficulty in consociative democracies, especially since this development may negatively affect the autonomy of various actors, and because it is not perceived as something needed to forge compromises. In consociative democracies, public-policy making involves “gathering” and combining ideas — and at times contradictory interests — to a greater extent than it involves “deciding” between alternatives. If the mobilisation of objectified knowledge is not necessarily in contradiction with this political culture, neither does it appear to be, of necessity, an inherent part of it.

RECENT CHANGES

Historically, the consociational model has been strongest in the educational sector. In this sector, network autonomy (public or private) has rarely favoured accumulation of data on the entire system. Moreover, starting in the early 1990s, several actors, including the OECD, indicated that there was a deficit of system evaluation and management.

As of the late 1990s, the educational system underwent significant change. The autonomy of the different sectors declined, inter-segmental compromises increased and the role of the State grew stronger. These transformations culminated in, or partially conveyed, a change in paradigm that defined educational policy in terms of measurable results (rather than in terms of values) and that assigned a management and evaluation role to the State.

It was in this context of transformation that the first PISA surveys were distributed in French-speaking Belgium. Due to a series of specific factors and circumstances, the PISA mechanism — as well as other types of international surveys — found a place in the system. First, certain actors felt that the lack of evaluation and, more generally, of data collected

on Belgium, created problems, especially beginning in the 1990s. The OECD itself had formulated this critique: the report on Belgium it produced at the time had a long-term impact on people’s opinions, and today is still cited by the actors when they discuss the recent history of the educational system. In the early 1990s, the idea that Belgium was suffering from a paucity of data on the operation and results of its educational system began to gain ground.

At the time of the first PISA survey, external assessment instruments already existed, though they were of uncertain reliability. They were supported by only a small group of actors and not really accepted by the political authorities. At the time, it was impossible to identify an actor with sufficient legitimacy to establish an evaluation mechanism for the entire territory of the FCB. The question of setting up this type of mechanism at the international level was not raised in the same terms, and could be introduced without the Belgian actors being obliged to enter into a transaction with each other. Stated differently, the fact that the mechanism was created at the international level and managed by an international consortium, and the fact that the data was used at the international level, were probably all factors allowing it to quickly overcome the difficulties specific to the Belgian case. The international level had an important advantage: it was not “located” in Belgium.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE INSTRUMENT AND THE WAY IT FUNCTIONED IN FRENCH-SPEAKING BELGIUM

Now that we have pointed out the specific historical characteristics of the Belgian consociational model and the traditionally modest place of objectivised knowledge in the formulation of public policy, we will examine the place and meaning — for the present context — of external evaluation mechanisms such as PISA.

PISA is a measurement instrument managed by an intergovernmental organisation, the OECD. It is mostly used to standardise and compare various educational systems based on different dimensions. By defining these dimensions, the instrument facili-

tates the creation of a sphere in which educational systems are located relative to one another. Thus, it is not an instrument designed to provide services but to evaluate the quality of the services provided and compare them. As such, it does not belong to the family of Welfare State instruments (such as laws on financing). So what type of instrument is it? Is it a mechanism of the Evaluative State: is it a support and management instrument for decision-making? Is it one of the instruments in the accountability requirement as per Rosanvallon's meaning of the term (2006)? Can we analyse it as an instrument of soft regulation? We will examine and discuss these various propositions by comparing them to the observations we made in the Belgian context (Cattonar *et al.*, 2009)³.

A DECISION SUPPORT INSTRUMENT PROMOTING THE DEVELOPMENT OF EVIDENCE-BASED POLICY? In the light of our empirical observations, is it appropriate to view PISA as a decision support instrument? Does this instrument belong to the evidence-based policy dynamic?

Those who designed the PISA instrument viewed it as a decision support instrument. It was introduced as a mechanism for the external evaluation of educational systems, generating knowledge designed to facilitate policy decisions. Defined by the OECD as an instrument to "help governments learn policy-oriented lessons based on results" (OECD, n.d., p. 7; TT), it is supposed to "help countries better understand the processes that determine the quality and fairness of the results of learning in the educational, social and cultural contexts of educational systems" (OECD, n.d., p. 10; TT): "PISA provides broad evaluation (...) giving direction to policy decisions and the allocation of resources" (OECD, 2001, p. 29; TT). Thus, underlying PISA there is a discourse regarding the way it should be used that is rooted in the evidence-based policy model.

What about its application? Is it appropriate to view PISA as belonging to the family of instruments that come under the domain of evaluative State? The thesis of the Evaluator-State must be understood here in reference the decline of the Welfare State as a purveyor of public goods and services. According to this thesis (Broadfoot, 2000), the

withdrawal of the State as a purveyor of services is accompanied by a strengthening of the State as an evaluator of the quality and performance of services henceforth provided by a variety of actors, be they public or private. This type of State provides itself with instruments enabling it to monitor and verify that the missions are being carried out properly, with a view to managing, adjusting and taking decisions based on the results of the evaluations. If PISA is functioning well on the basis of this schema, that is, as a policy support instrument, then our observations should reveal that the policy makers are using the results to (a) identify the strong points and weak points of their educational system, (b) establish policies for implementation and (c) choose among the various alternatives. What lessons can we learn from our observations in this matter?

Our observations reveal, first, that PISA is well covered in policy debates in the media or parliament. Specific debates on the topic of PISA itself are numerous and involve various actors in the educational field (Ministry of Education, unions, scientists, political actors, education movements, parent associations, etc.). PISA studies have been discussed in reference to all major educational policies adopted over the last few years in the FCB⁴. However, nothing indicates that PISA has been deployed to establish policies following logically from the findings. The strong coverage of PISA in the debates stems from the fact that the survey results are often incorporated into debates between competing and pre-existing policy options that, to an extent, reflect traditional splits in the Belgian situation (see the summary table below). These debates, most of which deal with interpreting the results from the FCB⁵, set the educational system's various actors against one another. Topics covered include the delineation of the problems revealed in the PISA studies (weak results *versus* disparities in results; inefficiency of the system *versus* inequality in the system), explanations and solutions proposed in the studies (giving priority to the weakest students *versus* giving priority to the performance of all the students or the strongest students; regulating the system through the market *versus* regulating the system through the State; structural reform *versus* pedagogical reform).

Our analysis of the views expressed by the media and parliament reveals that the PISA studies have

SUMMARY TABLE
INTERPRETING PISA FINDINGS IN THE FCB

	Socialists, ecologists, humanistic democrats, the APED (<i>Appel pour une école démocratique</i> , or “appeal for school democratisation”) pedagogical movements, academic researchers, (parent associations)	Liberals, economists, the Catholic educational network
Problems revealed by PISA	Inequity (gap and variance in the results) Too high a proportion of weak students	Inefficiency (averages, grading) Too low a proportion of strong students
Explanations for the problems discussed by PISA	Structures in the educational system: structuring by stream or courses, social homogeneity, selection practices, practices regarding repeating, premature vocational guidance	“Top-down, bureaucratic” regulation process, insufficient autonomy exercised by the educational institutions
Solutions suggested by PISA	Extension of core courses Coeducation	School autonomy Basic learning
Countries cited in the model	Scandinavian countries, Poland	Netherlands, Flanders International PISA reports
Support for the argument or line of reasoning	National PISA reports Aims of PISA’s national managers	Aims of OECD heads

not really modified the dividing lines in the political debate over education. It also reveals that these studies are primarily deployed — using rhetorical logic — to legitimise (or de-legitimise) pre-existing policy positions, though they do not come out in favour of one or another of these positions. In addition, the same study may be used to justify conflicting positions, whose arguments are sometimes based on national reports and sometimes on international reports. This was true of the case regarding the autonomy of the competent authorities (CA) in the field of education. In Belgium, the principal political actors have for long held different views regarding the autonomy of the CA and the networks. Catholics have traditionally favoured autonomy. Socialists are generally opposed to it. Liberals, whose positions have historically been opposed to those prevailing in Catholic circles, now favour autonomy; their support derives primarily from their view that autonomy gives rise to competition, which, in turn, promotes the overall effectiveness of the educational system. The differing positions of the socialists, Catholics and liberals vis-à-vis autonomy belong to long-standing historical traditions (sometimes going back to the very origins of this country). Nowadays, each of the three political actors uses PISA to reinforce their position. This indicates three things: on the one hand, PISA data are useful to a variety of

causes pre-dating the survey; on the other hand, the data do not allow one to clearly favour one or another of the different causes; lastly, the findings do not change the dividing lines, which predate them. Use of the PISA studies derives from a “politicisation of the use of knowledge”, rather than from a “rationalisation of public policy” in education, as was intended by its promoters (Mangez & Maroy, 2008). Stated differently, political actors seem to use the knowledge created by PISA less for decision support than for justifying or advocating certain political ideas they hold in other areas. Furthermore, the political actors have often pointed out that the survey teaches them nothing they do not already know.

We terminate this preliminary discussion with a provisional conclusion: in practical terms PISA does not seem to function as a decision support instrument in the FCB. Nonetheless, to a certain extent the PISA studies seem to have influenced the terms of the debate and accelerated the placing on the agenda of certain policy proposals, such as the setting up of external management and evaluation (cf. Mangez *et al.*, 2009) or the issue of how to deal with inequities and co-education. In addition, intensive discursive use of the PISA studies undoubtedly betrays a new political relationship to knowledge: while Belgian political actors are not really producing evidence-based policy, they nonetheless

agree that educational policy today should be based on objective, formal knowledge and not on purely ideological principles. Thus, policy now tends to be portrayed as providing a rational response to findings that have been stated objectively.

A MONITORING INSTRUMENT FULFILLING AN ACCOUNTABILITY REQUIREMENT

In Belgium, does PISA function as an accountability instrument in the way Rosanvallon employs the concept in *La contre-démocratie* (2006)? Nowadays, the accountability model claims that organisations purveying services are increasingly accountable, that is, required to demonstrate their effectiveness to taxpayers and users. In this sense, evaluation instruments are the principal mechanisms in developing what Rosanvallon calls *démocratie de surveillance* (“vigilant” democracy, emphasising assessment and control). In his analysis, the basis for democracy no longer resides primarily in the ballot box and representation. Instead, control by the population is exercised through different mechanisms allowing citizens to monitor the policies and performance of public actors, the State and its agents.

Does this analysis model — which sees evaluation instruments as instrument used by the general public to control the actions of established actors — make our observations more meaningful? In any case, our observations demonstrate that there is broad media distribution of the PISA surveys findings. If we compare this media coverage of PISA to other national and international studies contributing comparable information on the FCB educational system, we see that it is unprecedented.

This appropriation and success of the public sphere, which is media-centred, derive in part from the instrument’s characteristics: the large number of countries covered, especially the involvement of almost all European countries; la production of PISA-specific data; the very great attention paid to the technical validity of the instrument; and the regularity and frequency of the survey. There can be no doubt that OECD communication strategies, too, have played a role in the media success. Lastly, PISA’s success also derives from the fact that it measures performance and facilitates the establishment of classifications, which users can easily use to evaluate publics or private services providing education.

PISA’s specifically cognitive effect is probably most significant for users and the population generally. To be sure, while education-sector actors — be they private or public — often state that PISA has taught them nothing they did not already know, this does not hold true for the general public. Thus, one might legitimately ask if one of PISA’s principal impacts in the FCB consists in generating and feeding a public requirement concerning education-sector actors, which includes the State and other public actors. One has to admit that very considerable efforts are being made (especially by the OECD) in the area of communicating findings, and that these are directed more at the general public than at institutional actors or scholars. One can only conclude that the survey findings are really intended for the general public. Seen in this way, PISA tends to function as a monitoring instrument on behalf of the general public. Significantly, some of the political actors we met refer to PISA as a “Sword of Damocles” hanging over them. In this scenario, the State is not a State-as-evaluator; rather, it is evaluated, classified and compared to other sources of educational services. Thus, in analysing the relationship between the State and civil society, it becomes necessary to introduce a new concept, that of “evaluation by a third party”⁶.

The inverted analysis implicit in the vigilance exercised by individuals vis-à-vis established actors corresponds, in the Belgian case, to a form of inversion found in the relationship between institutional actors and civil society. There is a gradual transition from a situation denoted by the trust and loyalty of individuals for organised institutional actors (De Munck, 2009) to a situation marked by citizens’ mistrust for the aforementioned organised actors. Thus, the increase in accountability is tied to a transformation in the relationship between State and civil society. The latter is no longer split and loyal; élites are now under the watchful eye of civil society (Rosanvallon, 2006). The break with “discretion” may be explained by in this way: discretion was of greater benefit to the élites than to the individuals they represented. Today, these individuals, extricated from the ties of consociational loyalty (De Munck, 2009), are demanding accountability and the setting up of mechanisms to monitor established actors or, as in the case of PISA, are making use of monitoring mechanisms created by other

actors, who thus function as “third party evaluators”. Indeed, it is agencies and institutions that are increasingly deploying these types of control instruments. In the case of PISA, it is the OECD that is creating and providing citizens, especially users, with methods for monitoring, controlling and maintaining pressure on institutional actors. We will return to this question in the conclusion.

CONCLUSION

Unlike the official line, which portrays PISA as a decision support instrument, our observations indicate that in French-speaking Belgium the instrument tends to function as a monitoring or control instrument, which increases pressure by quasi-market users on education-sector actors, be they public or private. According to this analysis, the role of the State is not strictly that of an evaluator, since it is itself being evaluated, classified and compared to other providers of educational services, be they Belgian or foreign. The OECD thus emerges as a “third party evaluator”. The concept of “third party evaluator” seems appropriate for revealing what constitutes, at once, one of the most fundamental transformations in the relationship between the State and civil society, and a crucial element in analysing the role of knowledge in the formulation of public policy.

Identifying a third party evaluator leads to taking a further step in analysing the role of the PISA

survey. At this stage in the analysis, we need to introduce another characteristic of the instrument — the fact that it serves as a vehicle for certain orientations in the areas of pedagogy, curriculum and, more generally, educational aims. These orientations (promoting competences, problem-solving... thus breaking with a principle of knowledge transmission) largely elude users, who often view PISA as nothing more than an “objective” and “neutral” diagnosis of their educational system. This is particularly evident in the absence of public debate regarding the internal pedagogical and educational content of the instrument. Indeed, while our observations clearly demonstrate that the findings of the PISA surveys are very widely distributed, the surveys nevertheless provide only a meagre discussion of the debates and questions; they rarely challenge the objectivity and neutrality of the instrument. Stated differently, the instrument seems to be non-politicised. Since public opinion, armed with the survey results, hangs over the heads of institutional actors, it is in fact promoting the pedagogical, educational and curricular orientations for which the instrument is a vehicle. However, it did not choose this involvement (since there was no public debate): it is unintentional. Firmly entrenched in a competence-based approach, PISA thus also serves as a comparatively discreet vehicle for disseminating educational objectives and practices. In this sense, it is a monitoring instrument simultaneously functioning as an instrument for “soft regulation” (Carvalho, 2008).

ENDNOTES

1. In the educational sector, educational “networks” consist of competent authority federations separated from one another because of philosophical differences. Four educational networks coexist in French-speaking Belgium: the State network of the French Community of Belgium, the network of local public authorities (towns, municipalities and provinces), the *réseau de l’enseignement libre confessionnel* (the denominational education network, primarily Catholic) and the *réseau d’enseignement libre non confessionnel* (the non-denominational education network).

2. Translator’s note: literally, “subsidised liberty”; a specific form of public-private partnership

3. The principal sources of data are interviews and documents. In-depth interviews were carried out with various actors working in the educational field (the *Ministère de l’éducation* — Ministry of Education —, school administration, heads of education networks, heads of teacher unions, scientists, political actors, inspectors, etc.). The documents analysed came from different sources: on the one hand, documents published by the OECD, PISA’s national office and the school administration that hands over the results of the PISA studies; on the other hand, re-transcribed parliamentary debates, articles from the print media and the work of researchers dealing with discussions on PISA.

4. Such as the curriculum reform setting up the *Socles de Compétences* (“competence thresholds”, 2001), the reform of teacher training (2000-2002), the decree on management of the educational system (2002), the “contract for the schools” (2005), the decree on external assessments (2006), the inspection reform (2007), the *Décret Inscription* (registration decree, 2007), the *Décret Mixité sociale* (decree on co-education, 2008).

5. On the other hand, discussions on technical, scientific or ideological aspects of PISA are rare and reveal a virtual consensus on the “reliability” of the instrument (see below).

6. This is the term employed by Rosanvallon (2006).

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