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Governance through Concepts: The OECD and the Construction of “Competence” in Norwegian Education Policy

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Abstract

This article investigates how the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has influenced a shift in the meaning of the term competence in Norwegian education policy in the past two decades. Recent Norwegian policy documents partially redefined student and teacher competence so that the concepts became more individual and performance-oriented. This departed from previous policy documents. Thus, the author argues, the OECD not only governs through numbers and comparison but also through what can be described as “governance through concepts.” Whereas evidence indicates that greater policy attention to outcomes and accountability, through policies directed at student and teacher competence, leads to increased student performance, researchers know less about whether such policies enhance opportunities for all students or whether there are reverse implications for social equality or the broader aims of education.

Keywords: OECD, soft governance, national education reform, competence, Norway

This article investigates how the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has influenced the shift in the meaning of the term *competence* in Norwegian education policy in the past two decades. Broadly put, researchers typically describe how members of international organizations initiate, design, and organize processes and programs to influence domestic policymakers and their attempts to reform and transform national educational systems. The questions of how, to what extent, and with what consequences are constantly debated. Given the increase in international influences, the implications of international organizations’ influence at the national level are critical. The OECD’s influence on educational reform, especially through the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) results, has been extensively investigated throughout the last decade (Dobbins & Martens, 2012; Grek, 2009; Hartong, 2012; Smith & Exley, 2006). Few studies, however, have focused on specific concepts developed by the OECD or examined the role these concepts play in producing and framing new education policies. Prominent concepts are politically important, yet they are often taken for granted.

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Drawing on empirical evidence from Norway, this article examines how the dissemination of concepts plays an important role in the OECD's *soft governance* approaches. Norway is an interesting case because policymakers have recently increased the emphasis on student outcomes, new assessment and testing practices, and teacher accountability. Yet, Norway has a highly regulated education system that is predominantly public, and comprehensive schooling and social inclusion have been dominant features. The research questions pursued are: How has *competence* in the educational field been defined and constructed in Norway during the last two decades, and what are important shifts in representations? What role has the OECD played in the discursive construction of competence in Norway?

In this paper, I draw upon the constructivist theoretical paradigm within international relations. In particular, I consider international relations and soft governance approaches through a discourse-analysis inspired methodology in my review of Norwegian white papers published between 1995 and 2010. First, I give a more thorough description of the educational system in Norway and briefly describe some features of the OECD's work in the field of education. Next, I outline previous research on the OECD's influence on national education policy, the constructivist paradigm within international relations, and how discourse analysis has inspired the analysis of the white papers. Thereafter, I investigate the construction of competence in recent reforms before I discuss aspects of "governance through concepts" as a soft governance mechanism. I find a prominent shift in how competence has been framed in the last two decades, and I argue that there is a need to investigate specific concepts and their definitions when studying the influence of international organizations on national education reform.

Context

OECD in the Field of Education

International organizations have become increasingly active in the field of education, playing a more important role in shaping national policymaking since the 1990s (Mundy & Ghali, 2012; Nagel, Martens, & Windzio, 2010). The OECD is a particularly interesting international organization because of its work in the field of education policy. The OECD was founded in 1961, and 34 countries are currently members, though over 100 countries are involved when the OECD shares its expertise. Although the OECD was created without any formal mandate in education, its work within education grew in scope and influence during the 1980s (Mundy, 2007), signaling the acknowledgement of education as an important aspect of a nation's economy. Education has been reframed as central to national economic competitiveness, drawing on perspectives from human capital theory and the knowledge economy (Grek, 2009). The United States, France, Austria, and Switzerland put pressure on the OECD beginning in the 1980s, requesting that they do more work on education indicators and statistics. However, while national governments have taken the lead in the past, the OECD has increasingly shaped the content and design of its programs (Martens, Rusconi, & Leuze, 2007). Consequently, the steering capacity of nation states has given way to, and is increasingly being shaped by, international organizations.

The OECD does not have any legal, regulatory, or financial levers to influence countries, but rather relies on the exertion of a kind of moral pressure. The organization

possesses no regulatory means but advises national agendas. This form of governance is described as *soft governance* and is involved in what has also been described as an *idea game* (Marcusson, 2003). The OECD publishes comparative country reports, thematic reviews, educational statistics, and international comparative assessment studies. The OECD's publications highlight social challenges, the transformation of childhood, the increasing diversity after globalization, and the need for developing educational quality to address increasing inequality (Hopmann, 2007; OECD, 2008, 2010). Educational indicators have been further developed through the publication of *Education at a Glance* and through PISA testing, beginning in 2000 and carried out every third year since. Through these publications, the OECD is especially capable of exercising governance by disseminating ideas. Also, governments have often approached the OECD when there has been national opposition to new policy reforms and relied on the OECD to support their arguments in domestic political debates (e.g., Martens et al., 2007).

The OECD presents solutions for new challenges so as to build strong knowledge societies. In other words, the OECD seeks to spread information and education in order to influence a nation's economic growth and development, placing a strong emphasis on educational quality. Furthermore, the OECD presents improved learning outcomes as the evidence for successful development (Mausethagen, 2010). Within this discourse, improving educational quality and performance will create more equal opportunities for students. However, neoliberal policies within the field of education may also lead to increased inequality (Apple, 2001). Public debates about raising the quality of education often tend to emphasize easy solutions, such as testing and accountability measures, without talking about education in more complex ways and without addressing the structural conditions that cause inequality in the first place (Kumashiro, 2012). The emphases on knowledge and high quality education systems as the most important sources of future economic advantage thereby make it important to critically investigate the concepts, such as competence, that are central in the OECD's work in education and that are becoming a focus of national policy in countries like Norway.

Norwegian Education Policy

Norway holds a long and strong tradition of compulsory comprehensive schooling, social inclusion, and egalitarian ideas (Braathe & Ongstad, 2001). More than 97% of Norwegian students attend the public school system, which is expected to serve as a "social melting point" and promote social equality and democracy (Aasen, Prøitz, & Sandberg, 2013). This "Nordic model of education" (Telhaug, Mediås, & Aasen, 2006) has historically tied education to the development of the social-democratic welfare state, emphasizing the redistributive role of the state, and promoting social inclusion through equality of access and outcomes (Aasen et al., 2013; Telhaug et al., 2006). This model, or knowledge regime, has highlighted two commitments: Student outcomes should not be correlated with social background, and, therefore, to improve equity in education, resource inequality must be addressed in order to delimit the effects of socioeconomic status, geographical location, gender, and other demographic characteristics. However, new policy developments challenge these features of the education system. For example, Aasen et al. (2013) argue that *equity* has been redefined as *equivalence* in recent policy

documents and has caused schooling to increasingly be understood as an individual, private good that de-emphasizes equity and the notion of a shared common culture. I describe this process in more detail below.

Norway has a long tradition of governing through a national curriculum, combining a strong and active state with local developments (Gundem, 1993). The previous national curriculum from 1997 (comprehensive guidelines for elementary and lower secondary schools) emphasized the double purpose of schooling as caretaker of the national and local heritage and as knowledge promoter (Hopmann, 2007). The curriculum focused on subject content and what students should be taught each year. However, new and increasing evidence on the Norwegian school system, including the PISA results in 2001, revealed that the Norwegian education system was “not that great after all.” A leading bureaucrat at the time recalled: “It was no longer possible to deny that the Norwegian school system had a considerable knowledge and skill problem and that this had grown larger in recent years” (Bergesen, 2006).

Given this context, Norwegian initiatives aiming to enhance student learning have intensified over the last decade. Since the release of the first PISA results in 2001, politicians and members of the media have been concerned about underachievement and low quality in Norwegian schools. Reforms, schooling, and teacher education were criticized for not satisfying societal expectations (Karseth & Sivesind, 2010), and these criticisms led to new reforms in basic education (2006) and in teacher education (2010). The PISA results were thus important to legitimize new reform policies (Elstad & Sivesind, 2010).

The national curriculum to reform basic education, *The Knowledge Promotion*, articulates competence aims for the second, fourth, seventh, and tenth grades. Since 2007, fifth- and eighth-graders have also taken national tests. Key policy documents emphasized how teachers, principals, and municipalities maintained the flexibility and discretion to make decisions about changes in pedagogical practices in order to reach the competence aims in the curriculum. This form of decentralization has been described as “freedom, trust and responsibility” (Ministry of Education and Research, 2004), emphasizing school and teacher accountability. Flexibility is traded, however, for improved learning outcomes, and the state remains a strong actor working toward the goal of systemic change (Karseth & Sivesind, 2010; Skedsmo, 2009). Yet, Hopmann (2007) described the accountability system in Norway as a “no school left behind” approach, where policymakers introduced new mechanisms for control in close cooperation with the local municipality level and where there were no real stakes involved. Teachers and schools have traditionally had high status and autonomy and have been seen by the state as important for the process of nation-building and shaping national identities (Slagstad, 1998).

With a greater emphasis on accountability and assessment following international achievement studies and broader developments in the policy field of education, Lundgren (2006) also argues that the more traditional aspects of curriculum have been challenged and have become more learning-driven than content-driven. The previous curriculum described what content students should be exposed to, while the new curriculum framed student learning around competence aims. However, Norwegian accountability policies must be described as softer than those in countries with more aggressive neoliberal

policies, such as the United States and Britain. The emphasis on market mechanisms is downplayed in Norway, and the attention to learning outcomes is quite closely linked to the promotion of equality and quality and is not only a means to promote transparency and efficiency (Moos, Krejsler, & Kofod, 2008). Even if aspects of equity have been redefined more recently to become more individualistic (Aasen et al., 2013), Norwegian education policy holds a historical vision of equality as broader than just closing the achievement gap.

Throughout the past decade, Norwegian policymakers have used the OECD extensively as a knowledge source, both for validation and legitimation. Like other nation states, Norway has relied on international organizations for defining a sense of positive, beneficial, necessary, and acceptable action (van Dijk, 1998). For example, as early as 1979, Kogan argued that Norway wanted to be examined, observed, and corrected from the outside and that an OECD review could act as a constructive external validation of ideas already under internal consideration. Norway, a member state since the OECD was established, has become more willing to take part in OECD programs, and education policymakers have increasingly developed new systems for assessment, including national testing, and an overall greater attention to student performance and evaluation (Sjøberg, 2007). The broad approval for the new education reform, *The Knowledge Promotion*, in 2006, would likely not have been possible without the OECD's assessment studies and country reports (Elstad & Sivesind, 2010; Martens et al., 2007).

Traveling Policies and Soft Governance: A Literature Review of International Policy Flows

When education policies are imported or exported from one context to another following processes of globalization, existing literature often conceptualizes the process as educational borrowing and lending (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004), cross-national attraction (Ochs & Phillips, 2002), or as traveling policies (Ozga & Jones, 2006). An overall finding in the literature is that lessons from elsewhere increasingly provide necessary justification for introducing, legitimizing, and accelerating educational reforms in the domestic context (Martens et al., 2007; Steiner-Khamsi, 2004). The importance of external expertise from a source that holds legitimate 'authority,' such as the OECD, is seemingly quite critical in an international context of policymaking where there is also a need for more evidence to support reform efforts. When variations of traveling policies are found at the national or local level, they can be described as *embedded policies* or global policy agendas that come up against existing priorities and practices. Such a perspective acknowledges that national assumptions and practices remain significant, but when nations follow global agendas, their range of policy choices may narrow (Ozga & Jones, 2006).

Both politicians and researchers have been especially concerned about PISA and its effects. PISA is highly respected for its solid scientific rationality and has given impetus to particular objectives and outcome-oriented education reforms. Previous research has indicated that international tests can be significant legitimizing forces if a prior debate on an education reform exists and if the results can be used as the basis for a political agenda. Otherwise, the general response has typically been indifference (Steiner-Khamsi,

2004). PISA has, for example, had a decisive impact on reform efforts, especially through the implementation of new assessment practices, in Germany (Hartong, 2012), France (Dobbins & Martens, 2012), Sweden (Ringarp & Rothland, 2010), and Norway (Elstad & Sivesind, 2010). Such influence has been described as the “politics of league tables” (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004), “governing by numbers” (Grek, 2009), or “governing by comparison” (Martens & Niemann, 2010). That is, the OECD is viewed as an important policy actor, particularly through its development of educational indicators and comparative educational performance measures. These statistics are seen as highly important for creating a commensurable education policy field that has become increasingly consensus-oriented in terms of international standards (Grek, 2009).

In contrast, the United Kingdom and the United States have given relatively little attention to the PISA results (Martens & Niemann, 2010). Researchers provide three potential explanations. One explanation is that in these nations, there have already been long-term investments in high-stakes testing (Grek, 2009). A second explanation, related to the above, is that there is not much new information to be found in the PISA results for countries such as the United States (Hopmann, 2007). A third explanation is that smaller countries are in greater need of the expertise and advanced systems of data production and use (Martens & Niemann, 2010). Thus, in smaller countries, the knowledge deriving from achievement studies and evaluations becomes a reference point in an international rather than a local context (Ioannidou, 2007). The reshaping of educational purposes toward a greater emphasis on developing human capital for the knowledge economy has been a typical trajectory, focusing attention on the performance of educational systems and on workforce development. Social and civic outcomes, such as minimizing social exclusion and social inequality, typically receive less attention (Luke, 2003; Ozga & Jones, 2006), yet these outcomes are often discursively related, especially in a country such as Norway, where the aims of social equity have been very prominent.

Existing research on the OECD’s influence on national education policy has been particularly focused on PISA and the implications of PISA results. For example, Lawn and Segerholm (2011) argue that quantitative data, in particular, are widely shared and attended to. However, researchers have placed less emphasis on what can be described as traveling concepts and the role that these play in processes of educational borrowing. Moreover, Mundy and Ghali (2012) argue that there is a need for more detailed accounts and empirical studies of the influence of international actors on domestic educational policy processes and whether international policy actors in education shift domestic approaches to social inequality. This implies a need for greater attention to normative processes (Mundy & Ghali, 2012) and to the ideational claims that states adopt to preserve both national and international legitimacy (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004).

There are two main foci of the research on the role of international organizations within international relations. More rationalist approaches mainly explore the conditions under which international organizations operate in international politics and why delegation to international organizations occurs in the first place. The constructivist perspective focuses on questions of how and by what means intermediary organizations operate in international relations (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004; Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001). The constructivist approach within international relations is valuable for

investigating the issue at hand because it can give important insights into the role of ideas and the use of language.

The constructivist perspective emphasizes how international organizations classify the world by creating categories of actors and action, fix meanings in the social world, and articulate and diffuse new norms (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004). Finnemore and Sikkink (2001) define constructivism as an approach to social analysis that deals with the role of human consciousness in social life and with how human interaction is shaped, first and foremost, by ideational factors. Such factors cannot be reduced to individuals but are widely shared amongst purposive actors. Constructivists argue that state identities are constructed continuously through social practices and interactions within the environment of international and domestic politics (Wendt, 1999) and that working with international organizations can be viewed as a compromise between domestic and international political orders. Nation states thereby use internationally institutionalized norms in order to satisfy domestic concerns (Ruggie, 1995).

Within this paradigm of international relations, analyses examine how ideational factors shape interaction and change by being attentive to how language and rhetoric are used to construct what is appropriate. The role of ideas, norms, and arguments in international politics becomes a main focus for analyzing how international organizations teach states new values and understandings (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001) and how international organizations act as effective agents because they embody a legitimate authority. As organizations transcend national borders, they gain a broader view, allowing them to identify present and common trends and create comprehensive responses to challenges (Finnemore, 1993).

As the OECD does not have any legal or regulatory means of influence, soft governance and the so-called idea game (Marcusson, 2003) are crucial. Within such sites, ideas gain support and are disseminated through, for example, reputation, rearticulation, quotation, and cross-referencing (Ball & Exley, 2010). I study aspects of such idea games by investigating the OECD's influence in a domestic context, focusing on the meaning-making around the concept of competence in key national policy documents on current school and teacher education reforms in Norway. A closer analysis of specific concepts and how they are disseminated, produced, and reproduced in national policy documents has, to a limited extent, been investigated in previous studies of the OECD's influence (e.g., Hartong, 2012; Ringarp & Rothland, 2010) and can extend our knowledge about how soft governance approaches work in the field. The analysis also attends to changes not only between nations but also within the same society over time (Schriewer & Martinez, 2004) and to the (re)constructions that are made.

Yet another aspect of traveling policies and soft governance approaches concerns isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) and policy convergence (Holzinger & Knill, 2005). In DiMaggio and Powell's seminal article, they introduce mimetic isomorphism, representing the modeling that occurs as a result of uncertainty or failure. Organizations often model themselves after other organizations when they feel that they cannot reach their goals or when their goals are ambiguous. The modeled organization, typically perceived to be legitimate and successful, serves as a convenient source of practices that the borrowing organization may use. Nagel et al. (2010) emphasize how international

organizations and their ways of governance represent an important driving force in the isomorphism of educational policy, making national education policies look more alike. To make broader conclusions about this question, however, it is necessary to compare changes in different contexts. This study brings insights from Norway, a small yet wealthy country that traditionally has been highly concerned with social inclusion and equality, and investigates shifts in recent curricula towards a more neoliberal agenda. The attention is thereby directed towards a growing isomorphism and convergence internationally by investigating the discursive constructions over time in a certain context.

Methods: A Discursive Approach to Document Analysis

This article investigates how the concept of competence is defined and construed in national policymaking. To investigate such meaning-making processes, a discursive analytical approach has inspired the document analysis. Discourses are created and maintained by actors within institutions, and they may influence and transform organizations and institutions through the dissemination of ideas, values, and practices (Howarth, 2000; Neumann, 2001). Discourse analysis examines how such ideas appear primarily through the linguistic and social use of language because language is both a medium for understanding and for action (Howarth, 2000; Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 1999). Discourse analysts view language as a very important political tool, which actors use to create alliances and formulate new strategies for development. Through a discourse analysis, definitions, explanations, and challenges can be critically investigated and discussed.

This analysis focused on five white papers or policy documents, emphasizing two white papers that the Norwegian government issued before the 2006 reform in basic education and the 2010 reform in teacher education in which the main features of the reforms were outlined and justified. Bureaucrats in the Ministry of Education and Research (the publisher) wrote these white papers, yet the government in office initiated them. The Parliament subsequently responded to the white papers, sending signals to the government bureaucracy for how to further develop the policy ideas. Thus, white papers usually provide the foundation for future legislation. Given their status as documents that are used to give recommendations and promote an overall and integrated future policy in a field, white papers in Norway are texts that serve as key reference points for government discourse (Neumann, 2001).

Although I focused on the two white papers that laid the foundation for the current reforms, I have also included an analysis of three other white papers, produced in the last two decades, to more thoroughly represent the shifts over time. More specifically, I analyzed the white paper the Norwegian government issued before the last education reform in 1997 and the two that they issued before reforms in teacher education in 1996 and 2002. I selected these five white papers for analysis because they are the key white papers for the various reforms. The white papers were written in Norwegian, and I translated the quotes into English. Through a more specific analysis of the concept of *competence*, I investigated a common concept that in everyday language is often not considered to be a contested and normative concept but still has specific representations attached to it.

I have extracted and applied tools derived from discourse-analytical approaches in the analysis (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 1999). One important starting point when using a discourse perspective is an approach often described as “problem-drivenness” (Bacchi, 2009), which focuses on the formulation of problems and on the articulation of solutions, thereby also attempting to uncover various political projects. This approach of asking questions about policies provides an open-ended mode, yet still enables an appraisal of a policy agenda and an investigation of how key concepts in the texts have become legitimate (Goodwin, 2012). In particular, I looked at how competence was used and how issues around competence were represented in the policy texts. As typically used in discourse analysis, representation refers to the language used in text or talk to give meaning to social practices, to events, to groups, and to conditions and objects (Fairclough, 1992). An important perspective in discourse analysis is that all texts are intertextual (i.e., they draw upon other texts or discourses). As such, meaning is construed by discursive, linguistic representations. Other tools of discourse analysis include the mapping of words, choice of words, and clusters of words (the white papers do not vary tremendously in length). Floating signifiers are words that are especially open for definition and that different discourses define differently. For example, *learning* is an example of a floating signifier within the field of education. These signifiers are not completely defined until they are connected to other representations (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 1999).

In the following section, I analyze the main shifts over time before focusing on a more in-depth analysis of the concept of competence in the current educational reforms. Thereafter, I discuss the prominent constructions in relation to the soft governance mechanisms of the OECD, and what I describe as *governance through concepts*.

Competence in the National Curricula for Compulsory School

There are two prominent developments to be highlighted across the two recent reforms in compulsory education. First, there was a large increase in the use of the term competence, and second, there has been an increasing emphasis on competence as something an individual reaches and performs. To give an outline of the shift in emphasis and meaning construction around competence, I first describe the white paper preceding the previous curriculum. In White Paper 29 (1994-1995), which mainly outlined the foundation for the previous national curriculum (L 97 curriculum), competence was not a prominent word. It was used only a handful of times (six) and then in relation either to competence in language or lifelong learning. For example, it was stated: “Education shall encourage lifelong learning, so that competence is developed and expanded throughout the life cycle” (Ministry of Education and Research, 1995). Broadly, the problems that White Paper 29 addressed were the rapid changes in society and their implications for children. Representations of the knowledge society and globalization processes were prominent, and the main solutions presented included earlier school start (at age six), greater focus on subject knowledge, a centrally determined curricular core in combination with local adaptations, and an emphasis on students’ practical skills. Rather than competence, “commonness in knowledge, skills and attitudes” were articulated as what students should learn (Ministry of Education and Research, 1995). The collective aspect

was highlighted through reference to a core curriculum, and the idea that developing such common knowledge was crucial to addressing societal challenges.

Competence became a very prominent concept in White Paper 30 (2003-2004), *Culture for Learning*, which is the founding document for the current curriculum for compulsory school and upper-secondary education. The main problem construed in White Paper 30 (2003-2004) was that national and international evaluations had shown that the results and quality of schooling were not sufficient in today's knowledge society, and this was, in many ways, new knowledge. The solutions included greater emphasis on student learning, student competence, and student performance, as well as on competence among the various actors within the educational system. Throughout White Paper 30 (2003-2004), competence was used more than 220 times. The development of functional competence was prominent. The report states, "An important basis for learning and development is therefore for all pupils to be put in situations where they are given relevant challenges to develop their competence" (p. 31). Competence was, to a great extent, used to describe the increased demands for competence in terms of lifelong learning and occupational life. It was also used throughout the document to describe the importance of teacher competence.

Finally, and most importantly, competence was chosen as the concept for what students should learn, and the curriculum outlined so-called "competence aims" in all subjects for the second, fourth, seventh, and tenth grades. The competence that students acquire should not only be subject-specific, but also "be a key for how the individual acquires new knowledge and formation of a new identity" (Ministry of Education and Research, 2004, p. 55). Also, competence should be based on what the white paper outlines as the five basic skills: reading, writing, oral presentation, numeracy, and digital literacy. Within compulsory education, competence was, thereby, a rather new expression used for student learning from 2003 onwards and had certain representations attached to it (Mausethagen, 2007). Competence was not a central concept in the previous education reform. However, competence was defined and construed in a specific way following the OECD's definitions and became related to outcomes and what students should attain in current policies.

A specific definition of competence in White Paper 30 was communicated and used, in line with the work of *The OECD Program Definition and Selection of Competencies: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations*, also known as DeSeCo (Definition and Selection of Key Competencies). This project began in 1997, and a publication edited by Rychen and Salganik (2003) concluded the project in 2003. The DeSeCo project and its definition and conceptualization of competence were outlined as the foundation for how competence should be understood and used in the reform and forthcoming curriculum:

In this White Paper, student learning is described as competence aims. *The Competence Report* describes competence as the ability to meet complex challenges. It is the challenges, or the demands, that the individual, enterprise or society encounter that are decisive for what kind of competence that is needed. Competence is understood as what one does and achieves in meeting challenges. This definition is supported in the OECD-project DeSeCo, which describes

competence as “the ability to master a complex challenge or perform a complex activity or task”. (Ministry of Education and Research, 2004, p. 30-31)

The white paper outlined how competence would attend to the ability to meet challenges. However, it also added a performative and individual aspect to the concept by drawing on the DeSeCo work of the OECD, where the ability to master and perform the complex challenges was emphasized. This was an interesting discursive shift towards a greater concern with what individuals achieve and show when performing such complex tasks.

White Paper 30 was also concerned with the concept of literacy but argued that competence was a better word to use, following the arguments of DeSeCo. Rychen and Salganik (2003) have discussed how the study of literacy previously involved primarily the level of reading and writing skills that individuals needed in order to function in society. Gradually, PISA started to use literacy as a common concept across subjects and as an expression of how reading was the crucial competence in all tasks. In the DeSeCo publication, the authors argued that competence, more than skills and literacy, communicate what is important in the knowledge society. The authors of White Paper 30 also took up this line of reasoning before presenting the new curriculum because skills, among other things, have been related to a greater extent to the industrial society’s need for specific and particular qualifications.

Competence, as it is used in the current curriculum, does not define how students should work but rather what they should be able to perform at a certain point in their development, which is a conceptualization of competence that goes beyond factual knowledge. It is more than knowledge and skills and includes the ability to extract, interpret, and use knowledge in both familiar and unfamiliar situations (e.g., in the workplace). The discursive constructions thereby strengthened certain ideas of competence, which was a significant shift in the meaning-making around student learning from the previous curriculum.

Competence in Teacher Education Reform(s)

Competence was also constructed in new ways in the new teacher education reform. Contrary to the reforms in compulsory education, competence was used as a common term to describe teachers’ knowledge in all three white papers on teacher education reform in the past two decades. However, there has been a steady upward trend in the number of times competency has been used. In this case, there was an interesting shift in how competence was used, and it was conceptualized in new ways following the use of the DeSeCo definition of competence. Broadly speaking, this concept described what constituted teachers’ knowledge and teachers’ work. Thus, competence has appeared as a floating signifier that has been given different meanings within teacher education during the past 15 years. This serves to illustrate a greater shift in conceptions of knowledge and the aims of education more broadly. In the two current reforms, competence is constructed as more performative and as something a teacher can reach and show successfully.

The problem articulated in White Paper 48 (1996-1997) was related to the introduction of new school reforms that placed greater demands on the teacher role and teacher competencies. These reforms emphasized a need for professional teachers who have an apparent service ethic, in-depth subject knowledge, and a reflective pedagogical view (Ministry of Education and Research, 1997, p. 11). For such demands to be met, teacher education must be grounded in more general requests for competence and qualifications. The following areas of competence were outlined: (a) subject competence, (b) professional ethics competence, (c) didactic competence, (d) social competence, and (e) change and development competence. The solution involved assigning certain entities, mainly teacher education institutions, with the responsibility of ‘giving’ competence to pre-service teachers.

The background for White Paper 16 (2001-2002) was the reorganization of teacher education in accordance with the Bologna System (Ministry of Education and Research, 2002). The introduction to this white paper stated how teacher practice required that teachers have a “solid professional competence” (Ministry of Education and Research, 2002, p. 8). Teacher competencies were considered a necessary condition for implementation of recent school reforms, and educational solutions were, to a great extent, formulated in terms of the need for more competence. The same areas of competence previously mentioned in White Paper 48 (1996-1997) were outlined. So-called “development and change” competence was given a great deal of attention throughout the document and was related to the importance of lifelong learning for teachers, so that they may continue updating their knowledge and competence. More competence, which was described as an aim in and of itself, was portrayed as a solution to challenges in teachers’ work and as a characteristic that would promote a higher quality education system (Mausethagen & Granlund, 2012).

White Paper 11 (2008-2009) emphasized that the learning results of Norwegian students in international surveys, such as PISA, were weaker than the government desired. This was represented as the problem. Teachers were described as the most important factor for student learning, and competencies that research demonstrates to be important for student learning were therefore given much attention. The term competence was used extensively in White Paper 11 (2008-2009), *The Teacher: The Role and the Education* (Ministry of Education and Research, 2009). Competence was central for expressing teacher knowledge in the white paper and was used far more than the terms *skills* or *knowledge*. Teacher work was described in seven areas of competence, based on “demands and expectations in national areas of governance and documentations from Norwegian and international research” (Ministry of Education and Research, 2009, p. 15). Competence was further described to be the sum of a teacher’s practical skills, knowledge, ability to reflect, and personal qualities.

White Paper 11 (2008-2009) also put forward the DeSeCo definition of competence as the foundation for giving meaning to the concept (Rychen & Salganik, 2003, p. 43), and the paper explicitly stated that it was the OECD’s understanding of competence that was the foundation for how teacher competence should be understood (Ministry of Education and Research, 2009). An interesting change in how teacher competencies were described in the white paper was the emphasis on competence as something that should be manifested and shown in successful actions discursively related to achieving good

results. Therefore, developing teacher competencies was not an aim in and of itself, nor was it a guarantee for desired teacher work. Rather, it was constructed in the white paper as a way to reach the aim of increased student outcomes.

When compared to how teacher competence was described and conceptualized in previous teacher education reforms, it appeared that in White Paper 11 (2008-2009), the areas of competence were no longer sufficient to express what good teacher practice should be. Whereas previous reforms emphasized how competence was something to be “given” to the pre-service teachers, there was, in the new reform, another construction of competence. The white paper specifically states:

OECD defines the term as follows: “A competence is defined as the ability to meet demands or carry out a task successfully, and consists of both cognitive and non-cognitive dimensions.” The OECD definition emphasizes that the formal competence is not enough in itself, but that competence must be manifested to form the basis for the execution of the tasks. When we are talking about teachers’ competence, we add the OECD’s understanding of the term used. (Ministry of Education and Research, 2009)

The development of competence was not described as the primary aim for teacher education, but rather the means.

The shifts in how competence was used in the white papers illustrate how competence was represented differently over time and how the OECD definition of competence was crucial for the conceptualization of competence in the new education reforms. The descriptions in the new policy texts articulated a greater trust in professional competence acquired during teacher education. Knowledge was represented as an element of competence, and one must have mastered knowledge to perform as a competent teacher. In previous reforms, the competencies were described as something the teachers and the students had and possessed, rather than something one could show by producing good results. Students in primary and secondary school were also represented this way. They show their competence by reaching the competence aims and through the manner in which they do so. Another way of articulating this is to say that the conceptualization of competence has become more individual and output-centered where OECD conceptualizations have been important. Yet, this construction of competence should be seen in relation to the need to develop a more dynamic view of knowledge that is more in line with knowledge societies.

The shift in competence from a more general meaning to a somewhat more performative meaning was also found in the new representation of teacher competence as achieving results. This approach to defining competencies was related to what DeSeCo described as a demand-oriented approach: “The primary focus is on the results the individual achieves through an action, choice, or way of behaving with respect to the demands, for instance, related to a particular professional position, social role, or personal project” (Rychen & Salganik, 2003, p. 43). This approach to the concept has implications for the conceptualization of competence and looks at competencies as internal mental structures, such as abilities, dispositions, and resources that are embedded in the individual. Such an internal structure of competence would include knowledge, cognitive

skills, practical skills, attitudes, emotions, values, ethics, and motivation. There is a range of resources that needs to be mobilized for a competent performance. Yet, it is not just something that is possessed. Rather, competencies are mobilized and orchestrated properly (and successfully) at an appropriate time in a complex situation (Rychen & Salganik, 2003). They are more specific and, to a greater extent, construed as individual and measurable (Mausethagen & Granlund, 2012). Thus, White Paper 11 (2008-2009) constructed a shift in the conception of teacher competence that was different from previous policy documents. With this new conception, competence was not only to be found in the teachers themselves, but also in their ability to achieve results by succeeding in getting the students to perform.

Discussion

I argue that *governance through concepts* is an important part of the OECD's soft governance approaches, in addition to governing through numbers and comparison. The analysis of how competence is constructed in recent reforms in Norwegian compulsory education and teacher education has shown a prominent shift in meaning-making as well as a close relationship to the OECD's work. There was also a relationship between governance through comparison and governance through concepts because the white papers indicated that the PISA results represented a problem, and new reforms have been especially concerned with competence and performance. The explicit use of the DeSeCo definition and conceptualization of competence is a concrete example of how concepts that disseminated from the OECD helped to construct new ideas in national policymaking and define what was desirable, necessary, and important. As such, they also helped to discursively develop common worldviews and to establish a basis for the formulation of problems and solutions. For example, the problem defined was that competence levels were lower than expected and less than what was needed in today's knowledge societies. Solutions were often framed with an emphasis on the need for more competence. Yet, there was an important shift toward output and performance. When national policymakers adopt ideas and make them influential, as was the case with the OECD definition and conceptualization of competence, it is important to examine those concepts through a more fine-grained analysis of the relevant documents.

In particular, there has been a shift in the conceptualization of competence, and it has become more outcome-oriented and individual, shown through successful actions by teachers and students. The investigation of a specific concept has added to previous studies that focused on OECD's influence on educational reforms more broadly and where a myriad of factors played a role. However, so-called imaginary ideas—discursive terms, words, and concepts—also play an important role in reform (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004) yet are not usually investigated because they are often taken for granted. One such concept is competence. For example, it is difficult for anyone to be against more competence in itself or against the idea that competence is shown in how one (successfully) acts. The issues being discussed are rather whether and in what ways competencies can be measured and compared and the unintended effects that might occur. Thereby, the shift in meaning construction around competence illustrates important shifts in ways that education is viewed and acted upon and also shows how the concept of competence is contested.

The analysis also serves as an example of the so-called idea game that international organizations play in influencing national discourses on certain policy issues. OECD activities often challenge the self-perception of a well-educated society. The PISA results, as a prominent example, were the main representation of the problem in the white papers before the two recent reforms. Thereby, the images revealed gaps between self-perception and the evidence available. As the examples from the Norwegian context portray, bad performance in education was discursively linked to anticipated future economic and technological disadvantages. This appeared as a strong legitimization discourse, and the solution became increased focus on students' competencies and outcomes, both in compulsory education and teacher education.

Norwegian involvement in the work of the OECD helps to establish normative criteria for appropriate behavior among teachers and students. By referring to shared concepts, certain discourses are enabled to proceed in national policymaking. The process by which the dissemination of ideas happens can be described as traveling policies, spreading from international organizations into embedded policies (Ozga & Jones, 2006). For example, the OECD holds the potential to establish what it considers to be rightful national discourse and politically correct behavior, thus contributing to increasing isomorphism within the field of education. This analysis has shown how legitimacy through OECD activities and concepts is important for national governments in their quest to construct acceptable, appropriate, and positive solutions to educational challenges. Interpreting OECD influence on national policymaking using a constructivist framework reveals that involvement is mainly a result of perceptions that are shared among the states regarding the purpose of education policy. Such an interpretation would highlight that the willingness to compare educational outcomes to other states is primarily a result not of more rational calculations but of the diffusion of shared ideas or certain modes that influence actors (Meyer & Ramirez, 2000).

Theories from the international relations literature hold the potential to contribute to a greater understanding of how the OECD works as an international organization. The OECD has, in the last two decades, increased its jurisdiction (Porter & Webb, 2004), both thematically and geographically. The OECD's presumably successful soft governance approaches cannot be explained just by more rationalist logic. By analyzing ideas, concepts, and discourses that are prominent within the OECD's work in education through the use of language in policy documents, it is also possible to investigate how certain norms and values are constructed and, consequently, emphasized over others. Such norms also define what an institutionalist interpretation would label as "appropriate." In this way, OECD discourses are attractive to states that would like to appear as future-orientated, liberal, and efficient (March & Olsen, 1998), thereby also contributing to increased isomorphism in the field of education. Inspired by Bacchi (2009), concepts developed within OECD can also be described as bridging discourses, with the potential to mediate between the international organization and the nation state and to give directions for their policy initiatives. In the case investigated in this article, the OECD's conceptualization of competence was apparently a good fit with the current climate and political will to reform in Norway.

Concluding Remarks

This article has addressed how the concept of competence, derived from the work of the OECD, played an important role in new education reforms in Norway, and the findings have contributed to previous research on the dissemination of ideas from the OECD. Existing research has focused primarily on governance through numbers and comparison. However, this article has addressed what I describe as *governance through concepts*. The two recent reforms in Norway both placed a much greater emphasis on competence and outcomes than previous reforms, and the use of the DeSeCo definition and conceptualization of competence also implied certain ideas about learning and teaching. Because concepts such as competence are easy to justify and have a broad appeal, it is also difficult to generate objections. For example, it is difficult to be an opponent of increased student achievement, teacher competence, or a certain degree of professional accountability.

The analysis of competence has shown how the concept has come to play an important role in redefining student learning and how student outcomes and teacher accountability currently are framed. The possible implications of this articulation of competence—and especially in combination with assessments of student competence—have not been addressed in this paper. However, there is a relatively large body of literature addressing possible effects of increased emphasis on student performance, both for students and for teachers, or on the quality of schooling. Some would argue that this development enhances student learning and social equity, whereas others worry about the broader aims of education and how these are at risk of being downplayed when there is a stronger focus on competence and outcomes (e.g., LaBoskey, 2006). For example, if or when the system values teacher performance by implementing a system of sanctions or incentives for results, there can be adverse side effects in terms of equity and social inclusion. Teachers may focus on the “good” students, and the “good” teachers may prefer working in schools where they are more likely to be successful. Even if issues of diversity and inclusion are presented as important in the national and OECD discourse, their importance can be challenged because they are seldom used as important indicators of performance and quality. Another way of phrasing this shift is that new conceptualizations of education also redefine relations to equality (Rinne & Ozga, 2011).

Whether the development towards measureable competencies and outcomes will strengthen the more instrumental dimensions of teaching at the expense of broader social and humanistic aims is, however, an empirical question to be investigated further. For example, a review study has found that teachers’ social, caring relations to students are weakened under increased testing and accountability (Mausethagen, 2013), yet the findings in the existing literature are not uniform. Recent findings from the Norwegian context are also mixed. Student performance is generally on the rise (Kjærnsli & Roe, 2010), but studies have found that socioeconomic inequality has increased (Bakken & Elstad, 2012). Arnesen (2011) found that teachers’ commitment to inclusion has been challenged after the implementation of the newest curriculum and its more neoliberal notion of competence. For example, the number of children defined as failing to meet the competence aims has grown. The number of students receiving special needs education has increased since the new curriculum was implemented (Nordahl & Hausstätter, 2009). Yet, this could also suggest that more students receive needed support. However, such

tensions and variations call for closer, critical investigations of the positive and negative implications for students and teachers in this new competence regime. As this is also a question of the relationship between international organizations and individual nations, it is important to investigate implications for social equity and inclusion with a comparative perspective. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that, overall, researchers of educational governance should also investigate and account for the role that concepts play.

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