The Dynamics of World Culture in Education

Emerging Patterns in the Discussion of PISA results in Germany and Sweden since 2000

Sara Heinrich

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Department of Education
Abstract

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has been running the Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA) for almost twenty years and is widely recognised as an influential actor in education policy internationally. Much research investigates the extent to which the OECD’s education policy recommendations are implemented. However, the parliamentary process that mediates the space between the PISA studies and consequent school reforms is less well understood. This thesis tracks the mention of ‘PISA’ in parliamentary debates in Sweden and Germany between 2000 and 2018 and applies content analysis to identify changes within and between the two countries over time. The data shows that in both parliaments, the PISA studies are received largely without questioning the underlying methodology or test design. Members of parliament mostly refer to PISA as an ‘objective piece of evidence’ that supposedly captures the current state of the education system. PISA is also mentioned to discredit political opponents by blaming them for poor results. Understanding how members of parliament discuss PISA is important to explaining PISA as a phenomenon and contributes to a growing body of research concerned with the influence of the OECD on national education policy borrowing and lending.
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List of Abbreviations

ERIC    Education Resources Information Centre
ICE     International and Comparative Education
OECD    Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PISA    Programme for International Student Assessment
TIMSS   Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study

German parties
AfD     Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland)
CDU     Christian Democratic Union (Christlich-Demokratische Union)
CSU     Christian Social Union (Christlich-Soziale Union)
Die Grünen  The Green Party
Die Linke  The Left Party
FDP     Liberal party (Freie Demokratische Partei)
SPD     Social Democratic Party (Sozial-Demokratische Partei)

Swedish parties
C       the Center party (Centerpartiet)
KD      the Christian Democrats (Kristdemokraterna)
L       the Liberal Party (Liberalerna)
M       the Moderates (Moderaterna)
MP      the Green Party (Miljöpartiet)
S       the Social Democrats (Socialdemokraterna)
SD      the Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna)
V       the Left Party (Vänsterpartiet)
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Today, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), particularly through its Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA), has become an influential actor in education policy internationally (e.g. Bieber & Martens, 2011; Grek, 2009, 2010; Niemann, Martens, & Teltemann, 2017; Sellar & Lingard, 2013b). The individual countries’ performance in the most recent PISA study often sparks a lively public debate (Hopfenbeck & Görgen, 2017) and, especially in the case of performance being below expectations, leads to education reform or policy action (Steiner-Khamsi, 2003).

Germany’s relatively poor performance in the first PISA study created a public and political debate, a national educational crisis and a so-called ‘PISA shock’, that spurred policy makers on federal and regional level to pull together a seven-point action plan (Ringarp, 2016). Sweden ranked initially among the top-OECD countries in the PISA tests, and when its results began to drop in 2004, the public and political debate was first limited (Ringarp & Rothland, 2010) before increasing after the PISA results of 2012 showed Sweden having fallen from the top ranks to rank 24 out of 27 OECD member states (Henrekson & Jäervall, 2016:11). The coalition government of the ‘alliance’ (alliansen) commissioned an in-depth report on the Swedish school system with policy recommendations (OECD, 2015). The OECD has not only provided the PISA results to both the German and Swedish parliament, but also further analysis and policy recommendations. Both Germany and Sweden are countries with a long history of public education and a related, long-standing belief in the quality of their own education system. Comparing how PISA results have been received and discussed in Sweden and Germany gives insights into the OECD’s impact on national education policy generally.

The OECD has the vision of ensuring economic growth through cooperation (OECD, 2011). Education, and schools in particular, are framed as a means to the end of economic growth1. The organisation aims to prepare its member states to become and remain competitive in the face of globalisation and a changing global economy. Education is framed as key element to ensure competitiveness. Interestingly, research has shown that over the past decades, education has played an increasing role in the political manifestos and election campaigns of all parties across Europe (Jakobi 2011), a development mirroring the OECD’s growing focus on education. Research has also demonstrated that the OECD through the PISA studies creates international standards for education and global reference points that influence which policies nation-states seek to borrow and from where. Using the analytical framework of world society theory, Meyer suggests that such standardised testing redefines the meaning of legitimacy of the model nation state (Meyer, 2006). Steiner-Khamsi (2012) and other comparative educationists highlight the importance of local contexts and the dynamics within which policy makers act, leading to complex processes of policy borrowing and lending. This also suggests that exactly how PISA’s influence manifests and why policy makers act on certain recommendations while discarding others is more complex. While researchers interested in policy borrowing and lending have spent a lot of time investigating whether and in what form policies ‘borrowed from elsewhere’ get implemented in the home context, the pre-requisite and underlying shifts in policy makers’ outlook on their own education system are less understood.

This study compares the parliamentary debates of PISA in Sweden and Germany between 2000 and 2018 to gain insight into how parliamentarians discuss the PISA results and why and when they refer to these results to motivate reforms. Using a method of content analysis, patterns in how PISA is mentioned are compared between contexts and across time. In addition to contributing to the growing body of knowledge about the policy borrowing and

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1 The author wrote a course paper analysing the underlying values of the OECD’s 50th anniversary vision statement with that conclusion. The paper was entitled ‘Economic ends and democratic means? - A discourse analysis of OECD policy’ (Stockholm University, 2018).
lending process, this investigation also reveals underlying patterns and convictions about the role of schooling in our time.

1.1 Background: The OECD and Education

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) is one of many international organisations that were formed in the 20th century to increase the quality and effectiveness of international cooperation. Since 2000, the OECD hosts the triennial Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) studies that compare participating countries based on the performance of a representative sample of 15-year-olds in reading comprehension, science and mathematics. Additionally, the OECD hosts five more programmes that focus on education: the Centre of Effective Learning Environments (CELE LEEP), the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI), the programme for Policy Advice and Implementation (PAI), the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) and the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) (OECD, 2019b).

In 2018, 79 countries took part in PISA, marking a continued increase from the original 43 countries that participated in the first PISA study in 2000 (OECD, 2018). While in 2000, the PISA studies mainly focused on the three core competencies named above, other skills such as team work have been added to the suite of skills that countries can get tested. It is costly for countries to participate in a round of PISA testing (Sjøberg, 2019:16), and it is often up to the government or parliament to decide on whether and to which extent a given country participates in a PISA test round. OECD staff actively engage in promoting participating in the PISA studies to national governments and decision-makers (Grek, 2017). The OECD also publishes country reports, that can be commissioned by governments, with policy recommendations aiming to improve their students’ performance. For Sweden, for example, the report Improving Schools in Sweden: An OECD perspective (OECD, 2015) was published in 2015.

The OECD’s Directorate of Education and Skills has so far been led by two men that have been in charge of the development, expansion and roll-out of the PISA studies. The Australian Barry McGaw was head of the Directorate until 2005, overseeing the development and initial implementation of PISA. He has since returned to teaching at the University of Melbourne. The incumbent Director of Education and Skills and Special Advisor on Education Policy to the Secretary-General, Andreas Schleicher, is of German origin, holding a degree in Physics from a German university and has also studied mathematics and statistics in Australia (OECD, 2019a). The OECD’s website described his role as ‘supporting the [OECD’s] Secretary-General’s strategy to produce analysis and policy advice that advances economic growth and social progress’ as well as ‘promoting the work of the Directorate for Education and Skills on a global stage’, fostering ‘co-operation both within and outside the OECD’ (OECD, 2019a). Albeit not the key focus of this study, Schleicher’s background and his connection to Germany is noteworthy and needs to be kept in mind for the analysis and discussion of findings, especially in the parliamentary debate in Germany, as will be elaborated later.

1.2 Aims & Objectives

This study broadly aims to describe, analyse and understand policy borrowing and lending in specific cultural contexts, namely Sweden and Germany, through examining their parliamentary debate. The focus here is to qualify the influence of the OECD on school reform since the beginning of the PISA studies in 2000. Seeing that the PISA studies test the level of knowledge and competencies in 15-year olds, the results mostly influence policy discussion on
any schooling leading up to this age. Thus, school reforms are a particular focus. By exploring the complex ways in which parliamentarians are influenced by the PISA studies in Germany and Sweden, the study hopes to contribute to understanding what drives policy makers, and parliamentarians in particular, to draw on ‘knowledge-banks’ such as the OECD (Steiner-Khamsi, 2012:4).

1.3 Research Questions

In this thesis, PISA’s influence and growing popularity among countries is understood as a phenomenon that needs further study. The hope is to shed light on how the OECD influences, through PISA, what parliamentarians, as a special group of policy makers, deem important regarding the education system as a whole. By looking at how parliamentarians mention PISA in order to highlight needs for change and to suggest reforms, generalisable conclusions about underlying motivations for education policy can be suggested. For this purpose, it is particularly interesting to trace how PISA has come up in parliamentary debates in Sweden and Germany since its initiation. Both countries have a long history of public education (see Chapter 4) and are mature nation-states, so-called model states. Research has found that these ‘Old European’ centres, such as Sweden and Germany, are often very well linked to world educational communication, i.e. world culture, ‘but have even stronger lateral capacities to maintain some domestic distinctiveness’ (Krücken & Drori, 2009:213). Sweden and Germany have gotten different feedback from PISA over time, so that this bi-country comparison will be conducted ‘over-time’ both within the countries and between them.

The research questions for this thesis direct attention to processes and choices from the standpoint of the borrower, using world culture theory as an analytical lens. As the theoretical framework will be elaborated in Chapter 3, it suffices to briefly describe world culture theory as a perspective that captures the policy lending and borrowing process as a product of cultural diffusion rather than the result of dominance or any other form of direct power. Seeing PISA as a factor in an emerging cultural shift, this theoretical framework allows us to investigate instances of shifting mindsets or paradigms about the school system, as have occurred in both Germany and Sweden in the last 20 years. Building on the existing comparative research on Sweden and Germany, the study at hand goes beyond what is being discussed or referenced, attempting to qualify how the PISA results are mobilised at different times and to what end. The research is guided by an overarching question and two sub-questions:

How does the reception and discussion of PISA results within the German and Swedish parliament change over time?
  a) Which patterns arise in the interpretation of PISA results among parliamentarians?
  b) How are school reforms motivated through reference to PISA by parliamentarians?

1.4 Significance to International and Comparative Education

Globalisation and its effect on education are a central concern to the field of international and comparative education (ICE). As the pace at which policy information can travel across the globe has become so fast that it can be sent and received almost instantaneously, policy researchers and comparative educationists alike are interested in how and why certain educational reforms travel from one cultural context to another, while others do not (Steiner-Khamsi, 2012). This study is situated at the intersection of comparative education and political sociology and seeks to contribute to the evolving body of knowledge on policy borrowing and lending within education, and schooling in particular. How does the reception and discussion differ between two countries’ national governments and what is similar? How might we account for these parallels and contrasts?
1.5 Structure of this thesis study

This thesis is organised to fulfil three important functions in relation to the findings: firstly, to provide the background against which the findings need to be read; secondly, to present the analysis of the findings themselves and finally to discuss the findings and their implications for the existing literature and future research.

As part of the background, Chapter 2 gives an overview of the existing literature about the OECD’s role in education policy before Chapter 3 introduces the theoretical framework of neo-institutionalism broadly and world society theory more specifically. As Germany and Sweden differ in their PISA performance over time, but also their educational history and parliamentary context, this is described in more detail in Chapter 4. To complete the foundation on which the findings can be analysed, Chapter 5 outlines research design and the method of content analysis applied. Then, findings and analysis are presented in Chapter 6. Eventually, Chapter 7 entails the discussion of the findings and their significance for the field of ICE as well as other disciplines interested in the role of the OECD for education policy globally. The concluding chapter summarises the work underpinning this thesis and sign-posts fertile ground for future research. All references and appendices can be found at the end of the thesis.
Chapter 2: Existing Literature

With the first PISA study’s results published in 2001, the research area is still relatively young, although very productive, and has not yet been structured or comprehensively reviewed. The existing literature on the phenomenon of PISA and its influence on education policy can be grouped into three broad groups, depending on the researcher’s perspective on PISA as a research object. The first group of work treats PISA, i.e. PISA test results and reports, as data that can be analysed for different insights and comparisons. The second group looks at PISA as a tool for the OECD to lend policies to national governments. The third group focuses more on the perspective of the policy borrower, looking at how PISA is perceived in different contexts. For this thesis, the latter two groups are of particular relevance.

This chapter first describes how the existing literature approaches PISA from a policy lender’s and policy borrower’s perspective, before relating a specific body of work by Ringarp and her colleagues (Ringarp, 2016; Ringarp & Rothland, 2010) in more detail as it is closely related to this thesis aims and questions.

2.1 The role of the OECD and PISA as policy lenders

The OECD generally, and for its PISA studies in particular, is recognised as a strong international influence on national school reforms (e.g. Addey, 2017; Michel, 2017; Odendahl, 2017). This influential role has triggered much research among comparative educationists and researchers from other disciplines, aiming to better understand the kind of influence and processes at play and asking how policy transfer is accomplished. There seems to be a consensus in the existing literature that PISA-based OECD recommendations have a trickle-down effect within countries and different, affected professions (e.g. Gorur, 2011; Grek, 2009; Lewis, Sellar, & Lingard, 2016; Pons, 2017). While this work shines the light on the PISA effects from the ‘policy lender’s’ perspective, there is also an evolving body of work interested in the ‘policy borrower’s’ perspective, i.e. investigating particularities of contexts and how context influences policy borrowing. This research is often comparative in nature seeking to explain the impacts of PISA in a specific country or regional contexts (e.g. Engel & Rutkowski, 2014; Lingard & Lewis, 2017; Steiner-Khamsi, 2016). Combining the two perspectives, it is important to explain the importance of PISA in particular country contexts as a complex process of policy borrowing and lending.

2.1.1 Theorisations of PISA effects on national education governance

In the existing literature, different theoretical approaches have been mobilised to explain the simultaneous appearance of similar responses to PISA results in culturally different nation-states. PISA as a phenomenon has been analysed drawing on three main theoretical perspectives: a) using Bourdieu’s work to analyse PISA as power through practice (e.g. Lingard & Rawolle, 2011; Mangez & Hilgers, 2012); b) building on Foucault to understand PISA’s influence through the concept of governmentality (e.g. Lingard, Martino, & Rezai-Rashti, 2013); and c) building on new-institutionalism to analyse PISA as a manifestation of world culture (e.g. Krücken & Drori, 2009; Meyer, 2006; Meyer, Ramirez, & Soysal, 1992). The approach leveraging Bourdieu’s work focuses on nation-states’ social standing and habitus within the community of nation-states. The Foucauldian approach activates the idea of power through discipline. In line with Foucault’s ‘panopticon’, PISA is seen as a mechanism through which every nation-state can simultaneously observe, discipline and exercise power over other nation-states while being incentivised to similar compliance. The third approach is based on world culture theory and sees ‘PISA’s growing influence as a specific form taken by a new global testing culture’ that spread over the past 30 years (Pons, 2017:139). World society theory
also sees power as an important concept but explains PISA as a phenomenon that spreads through cultural diffusion among nation-states aiming to comply with world society. In the field of ICE, world society theory has been a useful lens through which processes of policy borrowing and lending could be studied and explained (Wiseman, Astiz, & Baker, 2014). As the theoretical foundation for this study, world culture theory will be explained in more detail in Chapter 3.

2.1.2 Standardisation and construction of policy problems

Focusing on the mechanisms underpinning the influence of the OECD and PISA, researchers have studied the implications of standardised educational measurement instruments. Corbett (2008), for example, discusses PISA with reference to the mental measurement and scientific management movements of the late 19th and early 20th century. He concludes that PISA is a product of these schools of thought combined with the values and aims of commodification and neoliberalism. Bulle (2011) calls attention to international competitive processes in education policy enabled through PISA. She argues that this competitive process is not fully rational and that country ranking and other PISA tools act normatively on national education aims.

Looking closely at how the OECD instigates instances of policy lending, Grek (2010) challenges how skills and competencies have been constructed as ‘policy problems’ and the need for ‘soft governance’ through new data, standards and policy frameworks has been defended. Examining the case of Sweden, Grek (2017) calls attention to the ways in which the OECD proactively enters the space of the ‘borrower’ and invests in the building of strong relationships with national policy makers and decision makers. Troubled by the ways in which PISA data is used to make ‘significant, high-stakes policy and reform decisions’, Gorur (2014:58) critically examines how comparability between different county contexts is achieved. She calls for a sociology of measurement that explore the ‘instrumentalism’ and ‘performativity’ enabling technologies of comparison such as PISA.

2.2 Understanding the policy borrower’s perspective on PISA

A range of work on country case-studies tries to understand the conditions under which OECD recommendations are received and PISA results discussed and to what effect. Considering how policy makers in Japan, UK, US and Germany use results of international comparative tests to advance school reforms at the national level, Steiner-Khamsi (2003) suggests three categories for national policy reactions: a) scandalisation, b) glorification and c) indifference. Steiner-Khamsi argues that ‘[r]eferences to international comparative studies or to league tables tend to be made if (and only if) they resonate with ongoing domestic policy debates’ (2003:4). She argues that comparative analyses of national policy contexts, in particular ‘a careful scrutiny of ongoing policy debates’ are necessary to understand why some disastrous results of international test resonate while others get ignored (ibid:5).

Therefore, a large body of work focusses on understanding the use and implications of PISA and other OECD influences in national contexts. Out of all studies aiming to understand the policy impact of OECD recommendations and PISA results, those published in English focus predominantly on European and North-American countries. Having experienced a sense of national crisis and severe ‘PISA-shock’ when the first PISA results were published in 2001, Germany has been the focus of many single-country case-studies (Bank, 2012; Ertl, 2006; Münch, 2014; Oberhuemer, 2004; Odendahl, 2017; Sellar & Lingard, 2013b) as well as comparative studies with the UK (Knodel, Martens, & Niemann, 2013) as well as

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Based on their own language abilities, the author mainly reviewed literature published in English, as well as some Swedish and German literature.
Canada (Adam, 2017). Sweden has often been analysed in comparison to other Nordic countries, based on the similar histories of education (e.g. Pettersson, Proitz, & Forsberg, 2017).

In trying to understand the dynamics in the borrower’s immediate environment, a range of studies have investigated the public debate of the PISA results and problematised the role of the media in Turkey (Pettersson, Proitz, & Forsberg, 2017), in England and Norway (Hopfenbeck & Görgen, 2017), Denmark (Cort & Larson, 2015) as well as the general role of political parties (Jakobi, 2011) and political stability (Jakobi & Teltemann, 2011). The dominant conclusion is that the media contributes to glorifications or scandalisation of the media (Steiner-Khamsi, 2003). This has however also been challenged, arguing that PISA markets its results in an intentional and media-friendly way in order to achieve the desired media attention (Sjøberg, 2019:44).

2.3 Comparative education work on Germany and Sweden

This thesis is not the first comparative study of Germany and Sweden with regard to their response to PISA results. Both Germany and Sweden have been objects of single-country case-studies as well as part of comparative studies with third countries. The database of the Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC) produces nine peer-reviewed studies when searched for “Germany Sweden PISA”, all of them published since 2004. Most of these papers either look to explain the reasons behind certain PISA results or attempt to critically review the PISA set-up. Using PISA results as data, four of these studies make comparisons across a larger group of countries within the European Union and/or the OECD, looking at parameters of educational access and equity (Gorard & Smith, 2004; Martins & Veiga, 2010; Schleicher, 2006) or different education systems effectiveness in increasing literacy during post-compulsory education (Pensiero & Green, 2018). One study explores the potential for equalising conditions for literacy learning for Norwegian minority students, drawing on comparison to Sweden, Germany and Denmark (Hvistendahl & Roe, 2004). In all these cases, Sweden and Germany are part of a larger comparison interested in understanding and explaining reasons for PISA results in countries involved. Highlighting issues of comparability across countries due to the introduction of computer-based testing, another study uses PISA performance data from Germany, Sweden and Ireland to suggest improvement to the PISA test itself (Jerrim, Micklewright, Heine, Salzer, & McKeown, 2018). Lenkeit, Schwippert, & Knigge (2018) use longitudinal observations across France, Germany, Sweden and the UK to investigate to what extent policy changes since the first PISA study have impacted the disadvantaging factors they were supposed to eliminate.

2.3.1 Judging the extent of policy borrowing in Sweden and Germany

Of most relevance to motivating the research questions posted in this thesis is the work of Johanna Ringarp. She contributes two papers focusing on the policy debate evolving around PISA in Sweden and Germany. Together with Martin Rothland, Ringarp studies how the two countries dealt with disappointing results, so-called ‘PISA shocks’ by tracing political debates since 2000 (Ringarp & Rothland, 2010). Drawing on Phillips & Ochs’ (2003 cited in Ringarp & Rothland, 2010) four stages in the process of policy borrowing, they argue that both Germany and Sweden only show evidence of having engaged in the first two stages of the policy borrowing process, namely cross-national attraction and decision. Published in 2010, the article did not yet consider the ‘worst’ PISA shock in Sweden occurring in 2013/2014 when results from PISA 2012 were published and Swedish results had continued to fall.

Although they do not explicitly mention the methodological design of the research, Ringarp and Rothland seem to draw on the national academic discourse employing research papers published on the PISA results within each country as well as the analysis of
official political documents, such as white papers, party manifestos etc. They note a significant difference in public attention paid to the first PISA results in 2001: while Germany’s below-OECD-average performance ‘produced a national crisis in a country that for years had viewed itself as the “great” education country’ (Ringarp & Rothland, 2010:422), ‘the Swedish results did not bring on the same rude awakening […] nor did any in-depth debates of even a description of the PISA study in general and the Swedish results in particular appear in professional pedagogical publications’ (ibid:425). The authors quote the quantitative results of searching library catalogues in both countries to support their argument. Notably, the paper goes into considerable depth in describing the suggestions and decisions of different political parties over time in the Swedish context, while not analysing the dynamic of parliamentary debates in Germany to the same extent. The present thesis hopes to add to the understanding of the debate over time in Germany and Sweden by applying its analytical framework to the parliamentary debate at the national level in both countries to equal weight.

2.3.2 Using PISA to stimulate policy change

In 2016, Ringarp compared Sweden and Germany again to understand how international assessments and other countries' results have been mobilised in support of school policy change (Ringarp, 2016). This time, the explicit theoretical frame of the study focuses on the process of policy borrowing, namely the process of externalisation based on Schriewer’s (1990) concept of ‘reference society’, and the reason for engaging in policy borrowing, namely, to create legitimacy. Ringarp conducts a document analysis of newsletters and policy texts by the German Kultusministerkonferenz [national conference of the regional education ministers], records and policy texts from the Swedish National Agency for Education (skolverket) and the Department of Education (utbildningsdepartementet) and other reports and policy documents, all published between 2000 and 2014. The key questions her study sets out to answer are:

‘What changes are (political) actors in Germany and Sweden striving to justify by referring to PISA assessments or the results in other countries? When do international large-scale assessments become an argument in reform efforts and how are the results used? What causes and needs are the subjects of discussion?’ (Ringarp, 2016:448, author's emphasis)

Ringarp’s research questions for the study presuppose, in line with Steiner-Khamsi's (2006, 2012) argument, that national policy makers use references to PISA results in general, and other countries’ performance in particular, in order to gain legitimacy and support for their own intended reforms. The focus of the article is said to be ‘on the consequences of measurements on the national level’ (Ringarp, 2016:448). Based on the mentions of both the PISA and other OECD countries, particularly Sweden and Finland in the German documents analysed, Ringarp concludes that ‘developments in these other countries are thus used as arguments to legitimise the reform’ (ibid:451). Similarly to Martens & Niemann (2010), she suggests that these developments indicate that, by referring to the success of other countries in the assessments, the OECD has been able to offer (indirect) recommendations for education policy change in Germany (Ringarp & Rothland, 2010). Ringarp also concludes that ‘references to the PISA are … used as an argument even when there is no true causal connection between reforms and improvements in results.’ (Ringarp, 2016:457).

2.4 Summary

This chapter has described in which ways the OECD’s influence as a policy lender has been explored by the existing literature and in which ways the situation of individual country contexts as ‘policy borrowers’ has been researched. It has also described the
comparative work done on Sweden and Germany, especially Ringarp’s work, at some length.

Undoubtedly, the establishment of linear causality between PISA results, OECD recommendations and policy implementation is always methodologically tricky and realistically impossible, as societies are complex systems and events emerge based on compound causality (Homer-Dixon, 2011). Given that context seems to matter to some extent as a large amount of comparative educational case studies assert (e.g. Adam, 2017; Bank, 2012; Bieber & Martens, 2011; Ertl, 2006; Sellar & Lingard, 2013), the possibility for politicians to entirely predict the effects of their suggested reforms is very limited. World culture theory, as will be elaborated in the next chapter, theorises the spread of similar reform ideas in different cultural contexts as a form of cultural diffusion or emergence rather than a form of direct or indirect power. This makes it interesting for better understanding the instances of shifting mindsets or paradigms about the school system, as have occurred in both Germany and Sweden in the last 20 years. That is why the study at hand focuses not on what is being discussed or referenced, but how the PISA results are used in discussion over time. The aim is to better understand the process of externalisation within the context of policy borrowing and lending, by which stimulations from other countries and/or other sectors (or sub-systems of society) become embedded in the internal logic of educational governance within the respective nation-state. The fact that both Sweden and Germany have implemented reforms but with differing success as their PISA results illustrate, make this comparative endeavour promising. Which themes and concepts enter, remain and leave, that is to say, travel through, the educational debate at state level over time? Following the brief summary of common theoretical frameworks used for such research in this chapter, the next chapter outlines the neo-institutional framework and world society theory in more detail.
Chapter 3: Theoretical framework

Since the first release of results in December 2001, the PISA studies have received a lot of attention in participating countries. At the surface, policy makers seem to show a remarkable similarity in their response to the results and the school reforms they consequently implement. Given the long-standing tradition of public schooling in Sweden and Germany, how come an international comparative study such as PISA becomes so prominently discussed? Under which conditions, if at all, does the reception of PISA results change?

To answer these questions, this research draws on new-institutionalist theory in its specific form of world society theory. In recent decades, the field of ICE has made productive use of world society theory, sometimes also referred to as ‘world culture theory’, to explore and explain patterns of educational policy borrowing and lending around the world. Sweden and Germany are both part of the group of Western ‘model nation-states’ that set standards in world culture. The phenomenon of PISA arguably frames the creation of new standards of education policy that the legitimate nation-state aims to live up to and that thus spread and diffuse, generating an evolution in world culture. The German and Swedish parliaments’ discussion of and response to PISA illustrates how world culture is at play in their efforts in maintaining ‘model nation-state’ status.

The following chapter briefly discusses new institutionalism in general and then world society theory in particular. Against this background, the next section makes links to the theories used by comparative educationist and political scientists to study policy borrowing and lending, including transfer processes across nations and sectors, as well as the concept of standardisation. This theoretical framework guides the analysis of the data, investigating similarities that might point toward a world culture in parliamentary debate, while also highlighting contrasts between the two case-studies that might rest on factors of national idiosyncrasy.

3.1 New institutionalism

Institutionalism is interested in the organisation as a unit of analysis and processes of structuration and bureaucratisation. The nation-state as a whole can be conceptualised as an organisation, that holds a range of organisations, such as the parliament or the government, within it. New institutionalism emerges from institutional theory and draws attention to ‘forms of organizational change … as the result of processes that make organizations more similar without necessarily making them more efficient’ (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983:147).

The Stanford sociologist John W. Meyer and his colleagues have used institutional theory since the 1970s to analyse patterns of convergence within and between nation-states globally. In 1977, Meyer and Rowan argue that ‘formal structures of many organisations in post-industrial society […] reflect the myths of their institutional environments instead of the demands of their work activities’ (1977:341). They distinguish formal institutionalised rules from ‘prevailing social behaviours’ (ibid) and challenge dominant theories at the time that believe ‘that the coordination and control of activity are the critical dimensions on which formal organizations have succeeded in the modern world’ (ibid:342). Rather, Meyer & Rowan, observe a significant gap between the formal (institutionalised) and the informal organisation (i.e. actual work activities and other prevailing social behaviours). They write:

‘… formal organizations are often loosely coupled (March and Olsen 1976; Weick 1976): structural elements are only loosely linked to each other and to activities, rules are often violated, decisions are often unimplemented, or if implemented have uncertain consequences, technologies are of problematic efficiency, and evaluation and inspection
systems are subverted or rendered so vague as to provide little coordination.’ (Meyer & Rowan, 1977:343)

They argue, in other words, that an organisation is defined by what actually happens which is often very different from what it states that happens. What parliamentarians actually say about PISA is therefore arguably more illustrative about the phenomenon ‘PISA’ and its influence on policy processes than finalised and published documents introducing new policies, for example.

Meyer and his colleagues develop institutional theory for three distinct, but related levels of analysis: a) individual human actors; b) organisational structures within societies and c) national societies and states. Seeing formal organisations as ‘endemic in modern societies’ they see a ‘need for an explanation of their rise that is partially free from the assumption that, in practice, formal structure actually coordinate and control work’ (Meyer & Rowan, 1977:343). This need for explaining the rise of very similar institutions and organisational forms in arguably very different national societies and nation states brings Meyer’s and his colleagues’ attention also to education. When studying policy makers’ interaction with PISA across different nation-states, Meyer’s theory of world culture is a lens that lends itself to looking beyond structures and spot patterns in the expression of individual members of parliament, that simultaneously shape and reflect the parliament’s organisational culture at the time.

3.1.1 World Society and World Culture Theory

New institutionalism, applied to national societies and states, analyses the model of the nation-state as a central, universal institution. The central claim is that ‘many features of the contemporary nation-state derive from worldwide models constructed and propagated through global cultural and associational processes’ (Meyer, Boli, Thomas, & Ramirez, 1997:144). World culture theory studies ‘the mergence and global diffusion of a common world culture with Western roots’ (Waldow, 2012:413).

Meyer et al. (1997) aim to explain the world of the late 20th century that displayed unexpected structural similarities between virtually all nation-states, as well as similarities in the ways nation-states changed. The core argument is that the structuration of a world society creates universal world cultural norms that nation-states are under cultural pressure to adhere to if they want to appear legitimate. This perspective, now known as world society theory or world culture theory, considers the nation-state to be a socially and culturally constructed concept rather than a ‘rational actor’ in itself, as realists assert (Meyer et al., 1997:147). Nation states are seen as ‘exogenously constructed entities’ whose ‘many individuals both inside and outside the state [engaging] in state formation and policy formulation are enactors of scripts rather than the self-directed actors’ (Meyer et al., 1997:150). Figure 1 shows how world society theory sees world organisational and institutional culture pervading into all levels of the nation-state as an organisation: the nation-state system itself (including the legislative); organisations and associations; as well as individual citizen and their identities (Meyer et al., 1997:160/161). The nation-state system is both shaped by world culture and in turn shapes citizen’s concept of identity. Due to the internet allowing access to information almost globally, people in a country are also directly influenced by the world culture of ‘individualisation’ and the identification as a ‘global citizen’. As a prism for analysis, world culture theory highlights similarities between different actors’ behaviour. To what extent can the reception and discussion of PISA in Sweden and Germany be described as the enactment of a world cultural script?
3.1.1.1 Properties of the culturally constituted nation-state

World society theory assigns four properties to ‘the culturally constituted nation-state’ (Meyer et al., 1997:151). One is the presence of a range of isomorphisms, i.e. processes of homogenisation in organisational structures and culture (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983:149) despite obviously existing differences in national economies and national cultural traditions. Secondly, the idea of the nation-state as a rational actor enabled through the communication of world-culturally acceptable goals. World society theorists observe that ‘nation-states are remarkably uniform in defining their goals as the enhancement of collective progress … individual rights and development’ (Meyer et al., 1997:153). Thirdly, the culturally constituted nation-state might display processes of decoupling, meaning that constitutive and communicated norms and policies might differ from enacted and implemented realities. ‘World culture contains a good many variants of the dominant models, which leads to the eclectic adoption of conflicting principles’ (Meyer et al., 1997:154). Lastly, Meyer et al. see expansive structuration, i.e. ‘the formation and spread of explicit, rationalized, differentiated organizational forms’ (Meyer et al., 1997:156), as a property of a nation-state emerging and embedded in world society. With these criteria, world society theory explains similarities in state formation and organisation through a diffusive process of emerging nation-states, or candidate states, modelling themselves on existing nation-states, or even the core Western nation-states that first adopted the model.

Within the context of world society theory, there might be isomorphisms in the way different nation-states process PISA results and in their reactions to them. Leading the country ranking for all three core-competencies tested, i.e. mathematics, science and reading, might be seen as a ‘world-culturally acceptable goal’. Processes of decoupling might occur by PISA results being used to describe a perceived need that is directly coupled to a political party’s aims, rather than the communicated goal of improving PISA results. Lastly, processes of analysis and response to PISA results are very likely to be reflective of expansive structuration. But what are the underlying processes at play that frame this modelling, with the aim to conform to a world culture?

3.1.1.2 Underlying processes driving the emergence of world-culture

Meyer et al., (1997:158) outline three processes that drive nation-states to develop isomorphisms. Firstly, the construction of nation-state identity and purpose happens through ‘cultural material’ that ‘defines the nation-state as preferred form of sovereign statehood’. Nation-states copy the world model of the nation-state and all related institutions in order to
achieve legitimacy. Meyer et al. demonstrate this sort of ‘mimesis’ being at work pointing to ‘more than 130 new nation-state entities hav[ing] formed since 1945 [which] consistently proclaim, both internally and externally, their conformity to worldwide models of national identity and state structures’ (ibid). Thus, national institutions and policies are not mirroring an idiosyncratic culture and history but are enacting conventions that lend legitimacy.

The second process achieving this world culture is the ‘systematic maintenance of nation-state actor identity’ (ibid:159). According to Meyer et al., this happens through the ‘authoritative external support for legitimate purposes of state’ (ibid), rather than through external domination or other more directly applied forms of power. Here, Meyer et al. (1997) highlight that international organisations such as the UNESCO give this external support, often postering ‘as objective disinterested others who help nation-states pursue their exogenously derived goals’ (ibid:160). Arguably, the OECD, through PISA, actively shapes the criteria that define legitimate actorhood for a nation-state.

Thirdly, Meyer et al. list the process of ‘legitimation of subnational actors and practices’ assuming ‘the legitimacy and presumed functional necessity of much domestic organizational structure, ranging from financial market structures to organizations promoting individual and collective rights’ (160). In that way, changes within a nation-state rely on ‘world-cultural conceptions of the properly behaving nation-state’ (ibid). It is, for example, thought to be part and parcel of the model nation-state to enable civil society to thrive in the achievement of legitimate goals of collective growth and individual fulfilment. In response to Anderson’s (1991) criticism of world culture theory, Meyer et al., (1997:161) argue that even nationalist and religious movements ‘intensify isomorphism more than they resist it’.

3.1.1.3 The concept of legitimacy within world culture theory

The concept of legitimacy has been much developed by Max Weber, who discusses how the moral grounding for different types of political authority is established (Uphoff, 1989). Today, and certainly in the new institutionalist tradition, legitimacy is applied to and studied within the context of organisations in general. For the purposes of spotting and explaining general trends in world society, nation-states are analysed as organisations with sub-systems and sub-organisations within them, but also themselves being part of organisational structuration of world society and regional organisations. Organisational legitimacy can be defined as ‘generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions’ (Suchman, 1995:574). Within the context of world culture theory, a nation-state’s legitimacy is not necessarily assessed according to moral standards, but to the extent that its demeanour is in line with the emerging standard within world society.

The above outlined four properties (isomorphisms, rational actorhood, decoupling and structuration) and three processes (constructing as well as maintaining nation-state identity and legitimating sub-actors) create the conditions for a dynamically changing world culture, rather than a static construct or immobile reference point that dictates nation-states’ behaviour through domination. World culture rather emerges as a product of an increasing number of nation-states adapting their actorhood to earn legitimacy, i.e. recognition by other nation-states but also by their own citizens. Furthermore, ‘legitimated actorhood operates at several levels (national, organizational or group, and individual) that partially compete with one another’ (Meyer et al., 1997:168). Considering processes of decoupling and structuration, emerging world culture models are bound to show ‘internal contradictions and inconsistencies [...] making certain forms of struggle inevitable in world society’ (ibid:169). All nation-states’ internal and external struggles and mimesis create an ever emerging and changing world culture whose trajectory world society theorists see in the original Western model of the nation-state.

World society theory sees the Western models of nation-states and their ways of organising and structuring society as the ‘model’ that became a world cultural standard and
therefore was copied around the world, in spite of very different historical and cultural contexts. Theorising the spread of similar education patterns in very different nation-states around the world, the Meyer et al., (1992:129) argue, for example, that ‘mass schooling made sense in so many contexts because it became a central feature of the Western, and subsequently the world, model of the nation-state and its development’. Sweden and Germany are both part of the group of Western ‘early adaptors’ that manifested the model of the nation-state, setting standards in world culture. Their discussion of and response to PISA illustrates how world culture is at play in them maintaining this status.

3.1.1.4 World society theory and education

Through the lens of world society theory, the emergence of mass education in almost all nation-states during the course of the 19th and 20th century is seen as a function of ‘the nation-state itself [as] a transnational cultural model within which schooling the masses became a major mechanism for creating the symbolic links between individuals and nation-states’ (Meyer, Ramirez & Soysal, 1992:131). Meyer et al. argue that conventional legitimations for mass schooling insist that formal education is necessary and beneficial for economic growth, technical innovation, citizen loyalty, and democratic institutions, among other things. Such functional justifications of schooling are rarely questioned, even though careful studies of, for example, education’s effects on economic growth suggest that this functional relationship is at best weak and highly conditional (Rubinson & Brown, 1994 cited in Meyer et al., 1997:149). Meyer and his colleagues are unsatisfied with the explanatory value of functionalist theories for the rise of mass education, as that emphasise internal societal characteristics as key to the emergence of mass education within a nation-state. In contrast, Meyer, Ramirez & Soysal (1992:146) use enrolment data from 1870 to 1980 for a quantitative analysis that evidences that ‘mass education spread around the world with the spread of the Western system, with its joined principles of national citizenship and state authority’. Using the institution of the nation-state and the proximity of a given country or colony to examples of the Western modern nation-state as a central principle of analysis allows them to explain the spread of mass education in colonies where internal societal factors favoured by functionalist theory are not present. The phenomenon of PISA arguably shapes world culture by creating new standards of education policy that the legitimate nation-state aims to live up to regardless of context specific preconditions.

3.1.1.5 Standardisation as an underlying process driving world culture in education

The term standardisation is not used in a consistent way across the social sciences (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2000:14-15). Calhoun (2002 cited in Waldow 2012:412) understands standardisation as the ‘imposition of uniformity on a good or measure, generally, in cases where data or products are unique or produced according to different criteria’. The use of the term imposition suggests an explicit use of power or a case of domination in order to achieve a common standard. Against the background of world culture theory, standardisation is rather achieved through cultural diffusion. As Waldow puts it, standardisation might ‘denote increasing convergence towards a shared standard, whether intentional or not’ (2012:412). The existence and direction of power or domination aside, there is a clear distinction between a given standard, which has been succinctly defined as ‘a fixed metric of merit’ (Rose & Ogas, 2018:187), and standardisation, which is the process of defining and implementing a given standard. Both the standard and its standardisation develop interdependently.

In world society theory, the Western model of a nation-state is seen as the standard that most if not all newly formed nation-states during the 20th century follow, in order to be perceived and accepted as a legitimate member of world society. Studying the process by which participation in education, and the expansion of education systems, evolved, Meyer finds that
aspects of economic and political development, i.e. the presence of institutions and structuration of the nation-state to such effects, have a much higher impact on enrolment figures than ‘properties of national society such as urbanization, racial and religious composition, independence and even the existence of a compulsory education rule’ (Meyer, 1971:146). Rather, the standard for a legitimate education system seems to be related to the political and economic institutionalisation of the nation-state and its links to world society.

In addition to the cultural standard of the nation-state, the role of international organisations is crucial. They define and disseminate the most important aims of an education system and the elements it should include (Jakobi, 2012:395). International organisations are key nodes in the complex system of world society and can be described as mediators that set standards and drive standardisation. The processes by which international organisations achieve this differ. UNESCO conventions make use of ‘explicit and binding’ standards, ‘while PISA rankings are more implicit’ (ibid:396). The object of this study, the OECD’s PISA programme, is an example of a standardised test being compiled into league tables to create ‘non-binding, yet powerful standards’ of how legitimate education systems should perform (ibid).

3.2 Policy borrowing and lending

Within the field of ICE, neo-institutional theory in general, and world systems theory in particular, has been used to explore a range of phenomena, such as education policy transfer (Wiseman et al., 2014). While world society theory aims to explain the simultaneous emergence of similar kinds of nation-states broadly, policy researchers and comparative educationists often look more closely at how and why policies are adopted, adapted or passed on between and across countries.

Policy borrowing and lending as a concept entails the study of local policy contexts and asks how and why certain policies were obtained or imparted. Processes of ‘policy borrowing and lending’ have also been referred to as ‘transfer’, ‘policy learning’ or ‘policy change’ (Steiner-Khamsi, 2012). Each of these terms describes the study of processes ‘in which knowledge about policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in one political setting (past or present) is used in the development of policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in another political setting’ (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000:5). For the purposes of this thesis, the term ‘policy borrowing and lending’ will be used for the same reasons as Steiner-Khamsi justifies its use in the World Yearbook of Education 2012: it is widely used within ICE, encompasses the idea of agency, ‘is neutral with regard to the purpose and outcome of the policy transfer, and accounts for a focus on the receivers, as well as the senders, in the policy-transfer process’ (Steiner-Khamsi, 2012:8). This thesis aims to understand the dynamics of discussing policy borrowing and lending between members of parliament in Germany and Sweden and the institution of PISA within the OECD.

Early work on policy borrowing and lending focused on how policies were adapted and to what extent changes were made to the policy and its implementation, classifying them as minor or incremental to fundamental, i.e. first-, second- and third-order changes (Hall, 1993). Bennett & Howlett (1992:275) distinguished between actors, content and effects of policy learning, asking ‘who learns, what are they learning, and which effects does the learning have on subsequent policy learning?’. Recent research has particularly focused on the political and economic drivers behind policy borrowing and lending within the context of education and schooling. The findings expose what Steiner-Khamsi calls ‘the common sense, yet naïve, assertion that reforms are imported because they have proven to be good or – even worse – because they represent best practices’ (2012:5). Instead, the emerging analytical framework illuminates reasons behind and conditions for certain policy changes by exploring how the process of policy borrowing and lending is shaped by more than the intention to learn from other countries. Waldow (2012:411) indicates that even mere ‘references to “elsewhere” may have effects in the receiving context without necessarily involving the transfer of content’, in
other words, nothing observable might happen precisely due to learning from other contexts. Rappleye (2012) argues that too much scholarship focuses on the local differences rather than analysing similarities between policy processes. He insists that ‘explicit attraction and ‘borrowing’ are more often than not instances of political production on a number of different levels: a carefully scripted, directed, and managed staging for the purpose of producing particular policy outcomes’ (ibid:122, author’s emphasis). Policy borrowing and lending is also analysed in the context of globalisation or the global knowledge economy. These are conceptualised as distinctive arenas within which policy borrowing and lending happens with specific drivers, for example to learn from and then out-maneuvre allies, partners and competitors (Carney, 2012:340).

Against the background of world society theory, Rappleye’s and Carney’s works as quoted above are particularly interesting for the research at hand as they offer a framework for understanding parliament as a public stage, accessible from within the nation but also from beyond. Thus, parliamentary debates are manifestations of world culture where ‘instances of political production’, that later manifest in policy documents, are prepared and articulated. How PISA is discussed in parliament is indicative of the policy outcomes intended by the individual speaker and the group of parliamentarians as a collective.

3.2.1 Cross-sectional borrowing and lending

Policy borrowing and lending occur between states but also between sectors, within states and globally. To distinguish these processes, but more importantly the similarities and intersections between them, aspects of Niklas Luhmann’s system theory can be of help. Luhmann sees modern society divisible into a range of sub-systems (education, law, politics, religion, etc.) that ‘follow their own codes and programmes’ (Waldow, 2012:418). Luhmann’s understanding of systems diverges from the common view of systems as consisting of humans or organisations. His societal subsystems are ‘internally linked by communications’ (Waldow, 2012:418, authors original emphasis). Luhmann argues that communications can only ‘connect directly’ within each social sub-system (Waldow, 2012:418, author's original emphasis). One could liken communications to languages that operate on their distinct logics, so that exact understanding can only be achieved within a sub-system, i.e. within the logic of the same language. Sub-systems can of course be influenced by the communications of another sub-system in their environment. But rather than getting directly adopted or absorbed, external points of reference need to get processed within the system until they are embedded in the logic of the sub-system. Luhmann calls this process of processing external points of reference, or so-called ‘irritations’, externalisation. It is noteworthy that in Luhmann’s systems theory, ‘externalisation does not come to the system from the outside: it is both instigated from within and processed within the system’ (Waldow, 2012:418). In other words, sub-systems borrow rather than lend new logics, concepts or other aspects of communications. This understanding of externalisation, in combination with world culture theory, allows for a deeper analysis of how ‘PISA’ as a phenomenon becomes part of the internal logic of a nation, a process that can be made visible through tracing the discussion over time, as will be explained in Chapter 5.

Recent research has highlighted processes of externalisation within the education sector, particularly in processing ‘irritations’ from the economic sector. Considering how nation-states relate to each other and interact in the so-called knowledge economy, Carney (2012) problematises processes of externalisation within the sub-system of education with regards to the economic sector. He writes: ‘the logic of capitalism requires that nations maximise their advantage, and policy makers operationalize this effort by connecting to – usually uncritically – the distinct fields of educational attainment and economic growth’ (Carney, 2012:339). Much research has highlighted how concepts stemming from neoliberal economics in recent decades became part of education jargon: e.g. performance related pay, standardised assessment, etc. (e.g. Lauder & Brown, 2016; Rönnström, 2015; Roth &
International organisations, especially the OECD, have played an important role in making such externalisation attractive or desirable.

3.2.2 The OECD as a vehicle for policy lending

In the framework of world culture theory, international organisations and non-governmental organisations are ‘primarily instruments of shared modernity’ (Meyer et al. 1997:164). Their influence grows out of individual nation-states’ desire to create and maintain legitimacy toward other nation-states as well as toward their own citizens. International organisations thus are seen as important ‘policy disseminators’, lending policies to different countries often as blueprints (Jakobi, 2012:393). They use their agency to identify common policy problems, frame them as such and assemble meetings to discuss possible solutions and ‘results of best practices and lessons learned’ (ibid). In this way, international organisations facilitate the orientation toward common goals and stimulate policy convergence (ibid).

Although the extent to which a convergence with regards to education policy is occurring is debated, there is broad consensus that the OECD, especially through PISA, is one of the most influential forces on national education policy (e.g. Addey, 2017; Bieber & Martens, 2011). PISA is conceptualised as an instrument that defines average performance and standards in achievement every three years, relating to the need for nation-states to have an effective and high-quality education system to create and maintain legitimacy. In other words, the PISA studies shape the direction in which world culture around schooling evolves. While the OECD might primarily be interested and involved in policy lending, this lending method relies on externalisation processes. Being primarily concerned with economic cooperation and development, the OECD facilitates ‘irritations’ from the economic sectors into the sector of education. It is not part of this study’s objective to understand the reasons for the OECD’s growing interest in education over time, but it is worth noting that it has been highlighted that the OECD’s current global presence in the field of education policy is at odds with a declining influence in economic policy (Takayama, 2012:148). Its attention to education policy likely points to the process of cross-sector borrowing from the economic sector to education occurring within the OECD. With PISA then being received and discussed in national contexts, it becomes a vehicle for both cross-national and cross-sectoral borrowing and lending.

3.3 Summary

This chapter has described how world society theory, as a particular theory anchored in neo-institutionalism, is useful in explaining the similar ways in which members of parliament in two different countries might discuss PISA. To lend analytical depth to explanation, this thesis draws on the large body of work on ‘policy borrowing and lending’ that has drawn on world society theory to explore developments within education systems globally. While neo-institutional theory is interested in explaining similarities in organisation, the framework of world society theory in combination with policy borrowing and lending steers the focus to the level of the nation-state and its sub-organisations as units of analysis. This allows for explaining similarities but also differences in emerging patterns in parliamentary debate. The hope here is to qualify the explanatory power of world culture theory in the context of parliamentary discussions through observations from the organisational level of the nation-state of policy borrowing and lending (a meso-level of analysis).
4.1 Germany

Germany is a democratic republic, in its current form since 1990. Between 1949 and 1990, Germany was divided into the German Democratic Republic, also known as East Germany, and the Federal Republic of Germany. According to the German statistical authority (DESTATIS - Statistisches Bundesamt, 2019), Germany has approximately 83 million inhabitants and covers an area of 357,385.7 km² (Statistische Ämter des Bunder und der Länder, 2019). Germany is a federal nation state, consisting of 16 federal states (Bundesländer). The federal states own the mandate for education policy. There are differences between the education systems from state to state. These differences have been found to have an impact on student outcomes and educational inequality (Freitag & Schlicht, 2009). For the purpose of this thesis, it is important to be aware that there are differences and that education policy is steered by the state-level government. To what extent this difference limits the comparability of the German and the Swedish parliament will be discussed further in the next chapter, as part of the limitations (section 5.3).

4.1.1 Germany’s PISA performance over time

In order to get a general grasp of Germany’s performance in the PISA study, it is useful to look at the three key conceptual knowledge areas that have been tested since the first PISA study: natural sciences, mathematics and reading comprehension. Figure 2 below presents the average points German students scored in these three areas.

Figure 2: Germany’s PISA results in core competencies between 2000 and 2015, based on data from the OECD, (2019b)
The German results were initially relatively low, and much below expectations, especially in reading comprehension. In the country ranking, Germany came on 21st place in natural sciences and mathematics and 22nd place in reading comprehension in 2000. This led to the performance to be publicly conceptualised and widely studied as the ‘PISA shock’ (e.g. Adam, 2017; Bank, 2012; Ertl, 2006; Münch, 2014; Ringarp & Rothland, 2010). Since 2000, results steadily increased until 2012, prompting the OECD to celebrate Germany as an exceptional case of national improvement in response to the PISA results (OECD, 2010). In 2015, results dipped again to the level of 2006 in natural sciences and mathematics, while reading comprehension remained at the level of 2012. It is also noteworthy, that the PISA test measures access and equity for participating countries. In 2000, Germany ranked last among all participating OECD member states with regards to equity. In no other participating country was a child’s academic success so dependent on their socio-economic background (OECD, 2013).

Since the PISA 2000 results were much below where Germany, as one of the leading world economies, had expected them to be, the publication of the results started a heated political discussion about appropriate reform responses.

4.1.2 Germany’s history of education

The roots of public education in Germany go back to the late 18th century and the beginnings of the institutionalisation of mass schooling in Prussia. In 1788, the final examination for general schooling, the Abitur, was introduced (Brown, 1911). By 1812, it was implemented across all Prussian secondary schools and extended to all of Germany by 1871, when the German Empire was formed. Prussia also introduced state certification requirements for teachers in the early 19th century (ibid:22). Prussia was one of the first countries world-wide to institute tax-funded compulsory public education and thus attracted much attention from educationists abroad (Van Horn Melton, 1988:xiii). In 1919, the government of the Weimar Republic passed a law on the general duty to attend school (Die Allgemeine Schulpflicht), specifying that all children had to attend school for at least eight years (Tenorth, 2014). Since the early 19th century, Germany has thus been a flagship case for public education and the self-image of German politicians and parliamentarians, as well as the wider public, developed accordingly.

Nowadays, parents in Germany have the duty to send their children to school between the child’s sixth and fifteenth year of life. All education systems in Germany begin with primary school, lasting mostly for four years, after which the student can attend a comprehensive school (where available), a secondary school (Realschule) or a Gymnasium. The latter school form continues to the twelfth or thirteenth year of schooling (depending on the state) and is completed with the Abitur. Secondary school usually ends with the tenth year of schooling, after which students generally take up an apprenticeship entering Germany’s vocational training system.

4.1.3 The German parliamentary context

For the purpose of this study, it is important to clarify three aspects of the German parliamentary context: the role of the national government in school policy; the power relations in the national parliament during the time-period studied; and any procedural idiosyncrasies to be aware of.

4.1.3.1 The role of the German national government in education policy

As mentioned earlier, the federal government can only influence education policy to a very limited extent as the mandate for education policy lies with the respective states. The distribution of the relevant responsibilities between the federal government and the individual
states is clarified by the German Constitution (Grundgesetz). In 2006, this law was tightened with a reform that became known as the ‘prohibition to cooperate’ (Kooperationsverbot), making school directives and investments by the federal government impossible (‘Föderalismusreform’, 2019). In 2018, the discussion on school-policy related cooperation between federal government and states was re-opened in the context of a large federal investment plan for digitalisation of schools nationwide (Deutscher Bundestag, 2018).

4.1.3.2 Power relations in the German parliament between 2000 - 2018

Between 2000 and 2018, the federal government of Germany has changed three times over five legislative periods. In 2018, seven parties were represented in the national parliament: the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) forming a faction together with the Christian-Social Union (CSU); the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD); the Green Party (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen); the Liberal Party (FDP – ‘Free Democratic Party’); the Left Party (Die Linke) and the Alternative for Germany (AfD). Table 1 gives an overview of political parties in the German national parliament and government.

Table 1: Overview of political parties in government and opposition in the German national government, 2000 - 2018

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Election Period</th>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Chancellor</th>
<th>Parties in Government</th>
<th>Parties in Opposition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14th</td>
<td>1998-2002</td>
<td>Gerhard Schröder</td>
<td>SPD, Die Grünen</td>
<td>CDU/CSU, FDP, Die Linke</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15th</td>
<td>2002-2005</td>
<td>Gerhard Schröder</td>
<td>SPD, Die Grünen</td>
<td>CDU/CSU, FDP, Die Linke</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16th</td>
<td>2005-2009</td>
<td>Angela Merkel</td>
<td>CDU/CSU, SPD</td>
<td>FDP, Die Linke, Die Grünen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17th</td>
<td>2009-2013</td>
<td>Angela Merkel</td>
<td>CDU/CSU, FDP</td>
<td>SPD, Die Linke, Die Grünen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18th</td>
<td>2013-2017</td>
<td>Angela Merkel</td>
<td>CDU/CSU, SPD</td>
<td>Die Linke, Die Grünen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19th</td>
<td>2017-present</td>
<td>Angela Merkel</td>
<td>CDU/CSU, SPD</td>
<td>AfD, FDP, Die Linke, Die Grünen,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After 16 years of a conservative government that also oversaw Germany’s reunification in 1990, the Social Democrats and the Green Party formed the government in 1998. The first PISA test in 2000 and the publishing of its results falls into the following fourteenth legislative period of the German parliament. The Social Democrats and the Green party also formed the governing coalition in the following election period but losing their governing mandate in the snap elections of 2005 that had been initiated by chancellor Schröder himself. With the parliamentary seats of the Green Party and the SPD not adding up to a majority, the CDU/CSU and the SPD formed a grand coalition government. After the elections in 2009, the CDU/CSU formed a majority government together with the FDP. Since 2013, Germany has been again governed by a grand coalition of CDU/CSU and SPD. All governments since 2005 have been led by chancellor Angela Merkel. It is also worth noting that the Liberal Party did not make the 5% cut in the 2013 election that is necessary to enter the German parliament but regained parliamentary seats in 2017. In 2017, a new party, the AfD entered the German national parliament for the first time and became the biggest opposition party.
4.1.3.3 Important rules and procedures in the German parliament

In the German parliament, the order of discussion points follows a pre-agreed agenda to which both parties, individual members or parliamentary working groups can submit agenda items. A special agenda point is the so-called ‘hour of current affairs’ (*Aktuelle Stunde*) where national concerns of immediate urgency get discussed. Shortly after publication of the first PISA results in December 2001, an ‘hour of current affairs’ was scheduled on the topic of PISA.

The president of the parliament chairs parliamentary discussions and introduces agenda items as well as the order of speakers. While a member of parliament gives a speech, they may be interrupted by shout-out and applause and other members of parliament may also notify the president that they would like to ask a question. The speaker then has the right to accept or refuse taking questions. All these aspects are also recorded in the protocols that have been analysed for this study.

Another aspect worth noticing is that speakers have the option to give their prepared speeches to protocol, i.e. instead of giving their speech live, the speech will be printed at the end of the protocol for that debate. This is done when either the agreed discussion time for an agenda item has passed or the speaker wishes to not hold the speech any longer for other reasons.

4.2 Sweden

The country has a population of 9,904,000 people and covers an area of 447,420 km² (‘Sweden’, 2017). Its area is thereby 25% larger than Germany’s, with a ninth of Germany’s population. Sweden is a constitutional monarchy, and has been since 1809, with the constitution resting on the principles of popular sovereignty, representative democracy, and parliamentarism (‘Sweden’, 2017). It is governed by a unicameral government owning all executive power and the monarch only exercising ceremonial powers (ibid). Municipalities (*kommuner*) form the strongly independent local government, established through a locally elected assembly with the authority to charge income taxes as well as fees for various services (ibid). Besides their accountability for local infrastructure, care and housing, municipalities are also responsible for the governance of schools, public assistance, and child welfare (ibid). Since the mid-20th century, Swedish government bodies have been actively involved in the process of educational planning, monitoring development through data collection and evaluation by national (e.g. through the national school agency) as well as international bodies (e.g. OECD, UNESCO).

4.2.1 Sweden’s PISA performance over time

As has been done for Germany, Swedish students’ performance in the three core competencies the PISA study measures, i.e. skills and conceptual knowledge in natural science and mathematics, as well as reading competencies, will be briefly discussed. Figure 3 presents the point averages Swedish students achieved in the PISA studies since 2000.
In the first PISA test in 2000, Sweden scored on average 20 or more points higher than Germany and ranked among the top-ten in reading, 11th in Science and 16th in mathematics. The Swedish scores remained similarly high in 2003, before declining steadily till 2012, when scores fell to the level Germany had in 2000 or below. The results picked up a bit in 2015, which was celebrated as a turning of the trend. One measure that did not improve in the PISA study of 2015 was equity in education outcomes. While Sweden scored well above average in this parameter in 2000, PISA 2015 found the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students to be wider than the OECD average (OECD, 2016). With dropping PISA results since 2006, the political debate about the best education reform response to improve results again picked up. The conservative alliance government of 2010-2014 commissioned a report from the OECD with education policy recommendations that was delivered in 2015, titled ‘Improving Schools in Sweden: An OECD perspective’ (OECD, 2015).

4.2.2 Sweden’s history of education

Public schooling with a duty to attend has existed in Sweden since 1842, making Sweden one of the earlier adopters of compulsory education. Since 1962, nine years of comprehensive schooling have been compulsory for everybody (Werler, Claesson, & Strandler, 2015:787). Since then until today, basic schooling consists of primary and lower secondary education united in one school form, the grundskola, after which students can apply for upper secondary, the gymnasieskol (Werler et al., 2015:787).

Equity has been a core value underpinning the Swedish education system in the second half of the 20th century. Until the 1990s, the education system was governed following the principle of ‘One School for All’, aiming to give any pupil the support they need to achieve the curriculum’s goals (ibid:784). Since the 1990s, school choice was introduced and now an increasing amount of free schools exist that cannot command fees but can establish special profiles. In the academic year of 2015/2016, one seventh of all students aged six to fifteen, and 25 percent of upper-secondary students, attended an independent school (European Union, 2017:7).
4.2.3 The Swedish parliamentary context

As has been done for the case of Germany, the following three aspects of the Swedish parliamentary context shall be briefly illuminated: the role of the national government in school policy; the power relations in the national parliament during the period studied; and any procedural idiosyncrasies to be aware of.

4.2.3.1 The role of the Swedish national government in education policy

In Sweden, the national government has the mandate to pass and change laws governing the school system. It is then up to the municipalities to enact policy directions and manage school-related budgets. In 2011, the new Swedish Education Act was passed outlining basic principles and provisions for pre-school, compulsory, further and adult education as well as out-of-school care (Sweden.se, 2018). In the same year, a new curriculum for the comprehensive school (grundskola) was introduced, containing clearer goals for children’s linguistic development as well as their scientific and technological understanding. The year 2011 also saw the introduction of obligatory national subject tests in year 3, 6 and 9 as well as a new grading system (Sweden.se, 2018). Jan Björklund, Sweden’s education minister from 2006 to 2014, described 2011 as ‘the most extensive reform year in the Swedish education-political history’ (Quotation 2010/11:48/02). It is noteworthy that 2011 also marks the year after results of the PISA 2009 were published in December 2010, forming another data point for a down-ward trend in Swedish PISA results since 2000.

4.2.3.2 Power relations in the Swedish parliament between 2000 – 2018

The period of 2000 to 2018 saw the shift of power in the Swedish government after governments led mostly by the Social Democratic Party (S) during most part of the 20th century. Table 2 gives an overview of parties in government and opposition during the time period of interest to this thesis.

Table 2: Overview of political parties in government and opposition in the Swedish national government, 2000 – 2018

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Prime Minister</th>
<th>Parties in Government</th>
<th>Parties in Opposition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006-2010</td>
<td>Fredrik Reinfeldt</td>
<td>Alliance (M, KD, L, C)</td>
<td>S, MP, V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010-2014</td>
<td>Fredrik Reinfeldt</td>
<td>Alliance (M, KD, L, C)</td>
<td>S, MP, V, SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014-2018</td>
<td>Stefan Löfven</td>
<td>S, MP</td>
<td>M, SD, C, V, L, KD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019-present</td>
<td>Stefan Löfven</td>
<td>S, MP</td>
<td>M, SD, C, V, L, KD</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Göran Persson led a social-democratic minority government with support of two smaller parties: the Left Party (V) and the Green Party (MP). The same parties supported a social-democratic minority government even in the following election period. In 2006, the conservative party (M), the Christian-Democrats (KD), the ‘Centre’ Party that has its roots in representing the voice of farmers (C), and the Liberal Party (L) formed a block known as the ‘Alliance’ (Alliansen). The Alliance formed the government for the two following election periods.

3 Quotations refer to a quotation in the dataset collected and analysed this thesis. The number is the unique identification number assigned according to the coding method described in Chapter 5, section 5.2.3.
periods. In 2010, the nationalist party ‘Sweden Democrats’ (SD) entered the parliament and in 2014 became third-largest party with roughly 12% of votes. In 2018, the Alliance and the ‘red-green’ block of Social Democrats, Green & Left Party (S, MP, V) received roughly 39% of the votes each, leading to a governmental crisis and difficulties in the formation of a government. Eventually, the Social Democrats formed a minority government together with the Green Party. After lengthy coalition talks, Stefan Löfven (S) at present leads a minority government together with the Green Party (MP), relying on the support of the ‘Center Party’ (C) and the Liberal Party (L).

4.2.3.3 Important rules and procedures in the Swedish parliament

Similar to the procedure in the German parliament, the order of debate in the Swedish parliament follows an agenda that is agreed before a meeting. Individual members of parliament can suggest agenda points; every ministry’s business gets discussed regularly following a rota. Similar to the German parliament, current and urgent affairs can be taken up in the format of an ‘Aktuell debatt’. These were used to discuss both the Swedish PISA results in 2009 and 2012. The Swedish parliamentary tradition also has the format of the ‘Party Leader’s debate’ which does not exist in the German tradition.

Contrary to the German tradition, a member of the Swedish parliament may not be interrupted by shout-outs and applause while they are speaking. There is however a procedure for asking questions to the government and having an exchange with a representative of the government or another member of parliament. In Sweden, protocols of the parliamentary debate do not include written copies of speeches that were not held, as is the case in Germany.

4.3 In summary: The case for comparing Germany and Sweden

While developments in PISA for Sweden and Germany have been diametrically opposing between 2000 and 2015, both countries share a similar educational history as well as a long history of modern statehood. They differ in area and population but seeing that the PISA studies considers countries as comparable regardless of these variations, the same is assumed for this thesis. They also have different systems for educational governance: Sweden steers education policy centrally as well as at a municipal level, while in Germany the individual states control the education systems. Nonetheless, the general importance of the national parliament is similar, and therefore the parliamentary debates are analysed and compared as places of political production and arena where diffusive processes of world culture play out.

Both countries fall under Meyer’s core of the early adopter of the nation-state model in Northern Europe. They are both examples of ‘expanded […] state administrative and fiscal powers’ (Meyer, Boli, Thomas, & Ramirez, 1997), albeit the extent of direct influence of the national parliament on education policy differs. Both countries have a well-developed, standardised infrastructure for schooling, taking pride in the provision of quality education for the wider public since the 19th century. In both Sweden and Germany, the PISA study is much discussed by policy makers and politicians, as well as the wider public.

This thesis aims to qualify this discussion: How is PISA received and discussed by members of parliament? How are PISA results linked to suggested reforms? The following chapter outlines the methodology underpinning this study’s approach to finding answers to those questions.
Chapter 5: Methodology and Method

This chapter elaborates on the methodology used in order to achieve the study’s aims and objectives and, most importantly, answer the research questions. This thesis explores PISA as a phenomenon whose understanding is central to the discipline of ICE. The research questions capture the author’s interest in how PISA is used, referred to and mobilised by policy makers in two different countries over time. Such a comparative approach over time is well-served through a large dataset compiled by the author out of which patterns can be identified that highlight aspects to analyse in more detail. Thus, a content analysis of 335 parliamentary protocols from both countries was undertaken.

As was shown in the review of existing literature, many existing case studies researching the effect of PISA results or recommendations in specific countries ‘deduce a PISA effect from a chronological analysis’ tracing mentions of the standardised test in official documents, political speeches or the media, as well as in interviews with domestic policy makers (Pons, 2017:38). These studies seek to understand how particular educational developments result from interactions between individuals and organisations in a given nation, linked to historical and cultural particularities. Another group of studies explores global trends in educational institutionalisation by studying the aggregation of actions at the collective level, e.g. state level. Neo-institutionalists seek to understand why nation-states take on ‘remarkably similar projects’ and are committed to ‘remarkably similar technologies’ in education (Krücken & Drori, 2009:218). They suggest the education sector has become more institutionalised and that international educational organisations, such as PISA, are ‘playing a sharper role’ in delineating suitable educational models for legitimate nation-states (ibid). The present study investigates the emerging patterns at the level of an organisation, such as the nation-state more abstractly or the parliament more concretely, that are triggered by the input of an international organisation, i.e. the OECD. By studying the parliamentary debate in Sweden and Germany, this thesis contributes to the conceptualisation of emergence of cross-national trends and cross-national variation.

The chapter first gives a broad introduction to the research design, clarifying the author’s ontological and epistemological considerations, before presenting the chosen method of content analysis in more detail. This latter part explains the sample selection and coding procedure and guides the reader through the methodology with help of examples of data analysis. The chapter concludes with a discussion of ethical considerations to prepare the reading and interpretation of the findings presented in Chapter 6.

5.1 Research Design

With the aim to identify, analyse and conceptualise cross-national trends in the parliamentary debate around PISA in Sweden and Germany, this comparative study situates itself in the long tradition of between-country comparison. Bray and Thomas (1995) propose a framework for comparative education analysis that distinguishes between three axes of comparison of place, actor and content put in relation with each other in the visualisation of a cube (see Figure 4). In the spatial axes of geographic or locational levels, this study focuses on country level comparison (Level 2). At the country-level, members of parliaments are being studied as actors and enactors of externalisation, i.e. the transfer of educational ideas and concepts from international organisations and ‘world culture’ into the national realm. Bray and Thomas do not highlight the legislative as a separate group. Regarding the aspects of education and of society investigated (i.e. content), the study at hand is interested in the nature of the political debate that precedes political change and policy implementation.
Figure 4: Present thesis located in Bray & Thomas’ framework for Comparative Education Analysis, adapted from Bray et al. (2014:9)

The research questions originate from an interest in patterns over time, introducing a temporal axis into the cube explained above. This interest in patterns arising from interaction of large amounts of actors over time requires the analysis of large data sets and implies a set of particular ontological and epistemological considerations.

5.1.1 Ontological considerations

World systems theory has been described by neo-institutionalists involved in its development as a phenomenological macro-sociological theory. This combines positivist ontological approaches together with phenomenological considerations of the developments in policy borrowing and lending. As a philosophical theory, phenomenology focuses on the creation of knowledge from the systematic reflection on a phenomenon. Such systematic reflection can be achieved through the application of the scientific method, quantifying for example the parliamentary debate around PISA in order to analyse the findings and to identify patterns at the macro-level. The author’s reasoning is mainly deductive, approaching the data with a pre-defined set of rules and categories. However, when conducting a coding sample, the author draws on inductive reasoning, observing emerging patterns in coding items 15 – 17 (see section 5.2.3) in the first 70 quotations in order to then define subcategories underpinning the deductive reasoning in the coding of the remaining 1303 quotations.

5.1.2 Epistemological considerations

In phenomenological theory, understanding of a particular situation or event can be generated through the analysis of how we describe a phenomenon as it appears in our consciousness. In this thesis, the discussion of PISA results is defined as the ‘phenomenon’ studied. The ways in which PISA is discussed by parliamentarians therefore can give simultaneously insight into how individual actors, i.e. members of parliament, perceive PISA, and into how the whole social group (members of parliament) experience PISA. This study is interested in the latter aspect and in comparing experiences of two social groups of members of parliament over time. This is where positivist epistemological assumptions become relevant. In its roots from the works of Comte, positive philosophy is based on the assumption that
reasoning and observation, duly combined, are the means to knowledge’ and that ‘there can be no real knowledge but that which is based on observed facts’ (Comte, 1853:5). For the purpose of this study, speech uttered in parliamentary debates captured in protocols is defined as the observed fact studied, whose aggregation over time in the two loci of study, Germany and Sweden, gives a rich description of the phenomenon of PISA stimulating policy borrowing and lending at the national level.

5.2 Method

Taking into account the methodological considerations outlined above, the method uses content analysis to describe how the reception and discussion of PISA results within the German and Swedish parliament change over time. Parliamentary discussions are an important arena in which new ideas from other systems get shared. It is in these general debates that alliances and majorities for specific policies are negotiated and the general approach by the legislative to a new stimulus emerges. Furthermore, parliamentarians also bring into the parliament influences from outside, suggesting that parliamentary debates mirror the wider public discourse in the country at the time.

The PISA test itself is very distinctive, meaning that the word ‘PISA’ can only refer to the PISA study when uttered. This makes a word-search approach to content analysis a very productive method. Of course, people mean different things when they utter the same word, e.g. ‘PISA’, and the acronym can hold different symbolic meanings for different groups of people. Nonetheless, as a phenomenon, it is possible to capture its nature through a word-search. Hence, the research was set up to conduct a content analysis for the use of ‘PISA’ in parliamentary debates in Sweden and Germany between 2000 and 2018.

5.2.1 Content analysis

According to Berelson (1952:18), content analysis is ‘a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication’. Holsti (1969:14) defines the approach more broadly as ‘any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages’. The key difference in these well-known definitions is that Berelson focuses on ‘quantifying’ content that is apparent, i.e. manifest, while Holsti speaks about specified characteristics, allowing for more latent content to be analysed, such as underlying attitudes to the category examined. Content can be a broad range of media including video, audio files, text, etc.

Clearly standing in a positivist tradition, content analysis is transparent and replicable, and depending on the amount of individual judgement required on the researcher’s part during the coding process, rather objective. Bryman argues that content analysis of documents allows for longitudinal analysis ‘with relative ease’ (2016:302). When aiming to understand social changes over time, it is important to limit the influence the researcher has on the subjects of study and allow ‘unobtrusive access’, a concept devised by Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, & Sechrest (1966). The easy accessibility of verbatim protocols for parliamentary debates in Sweden and Germany made content analysis a pragmatic choice that is well aligned with the phenomenological theoretical considerations that world system theory is built on.

Bryman (2016:305) presents a range of weaknesses of content analysis as a method. He contends that the quality of analysis is entirely dependent to the quality of the documents. For the study at hand, verbatim protocols of parliamentary debates are the richest data-set that can be unobtrusively obtained to fulfil the research aims. Especially when analysing latent rather than manifest content, there is a significant amount of judgement and interpretation on the researcher’s part, impacting the replicability of the study. The coding procedure detailed later in this chapter explains how subjectivity has been handled in this study.
Lastly, content analysis has been criticised for being a-theoretical and valuing possibility for measurement over the theoretical relevance of a certain parameter. In the case of this study, as explained in the following sections, only one search term was applied, namely ‘PISA’. All consequent statistical analysis of the primary counting and coding was conducted with the research questions in mind in order to ensure a strong theoretical focus and relevance.

5.2.2 Data selection

A search for the term ‘PISA study’ using the respective local languages (German: ‘PISA Studie’, Swedish: ‘PISA studie’) and respective digital parliamentary archives was conducted to identify protocols of parliamentary debates where PISA is mentioned. With the first PISA study being conducted in 2000, the search period was set at 2000 to 2018. As the search was conducted for ‘PISA study’, and not ‘PISA+study’, results included all mentions of PISA and study independent of each other. The returned protocols were then scanned by the author to ensure that the hits actually concerned PISA in the sense of the PISA study administered by the OECD and to deselect any irrelevant protocols. Mentions that were deselected concerned the mention of ‘Pisa’ as in the name of the town in Italy, as well as references to the so-called ‘PISA regulation’ (Swedish: Pisa-förordning), a Swedish pension regulation concerning employees of theatres and other dance or music institutions. The German digital archive for the parliament\(^4\) that holds all print document and protocol for the German parliament since 1949 returned 237 relevant protocols. The digital archive of the Swedish parliament\(^5\) found 98 relevant protocols, resulting in a total dataset of 335 protocols. The amount of mentions of the term ‘PISA’ within each protocol ranges from 1 to 65, resulting in a total of 1373 paragraphs analysed for the purpose of this study. Following the conventions of content analysis outlined above, these mentions were then interpreted and coded.

5.2.3 Coding

Each protocol was searched using the assistance of the search-function embedded in Adobe Reader. Every mention of the search term ‘PISA’ was read in context. A paragraph in which one or more mentions were contained was copied in original language into a table in an EXCEL workbook and coded according to the coding schedule (see Figure 5 for simplified, and Appendix 1 for full version). In parliamentary protocols, spoken word in parliament gets transposed into written language. While many parliamentarians prepare their speeches and organised their points into themes and key ideas, there is room for improvisation. In parliamentary protocols in both Sweden and Germany, spoken word gets structured into prose consisting of paragraphs. The paragraph thereby is one commonly used tool in layout in order to convey a thematic link between the sentences that are grouped in a paragraph (Crystal, 2003:232). The smallest unit for coding was thus the paragraph, even if it contained multiple mentions of the search term. All quotations were coded in their original language, i.e. Swedish or German, and quotations were only translated into English when presented in this thesis.

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\(^4\) [http://pdok.bundestag.de](http://pdok.bundestag.de)

\(^5\) [http://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/?doktyp=prot](http://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/?doktyp=prot)
Figure 5: Simplified presentation of code sheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code sheet item</th>
<th>Variable title</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Degree of interpretation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>today's date</td>
<td>Date of article coding</td>
<td>objective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>name of country</td>
<td>Name of country in which parliamentary debate happened</td>
<td>objective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>date of protocol</td>
<td>Date on which the parliamentary debate recorded in the protocol occurred</td>
<td>objective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>year of protocol</td>
<td>Year in which the parliamentary debate recorded in the protocol occurred</td>
<td>objective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>month of protocol</td>
<td>Month in which the parliamentary debate recorded in the protocol occurred</td>
<td>objective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>unique number of protocol</td>
<td>Unique identification number for protocol</td>
<td>objective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>election period</td>
<td>Number of election period</td>
<td>objective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Number of word-search hits</td>
<td>number of times search word 'PISA’ is found within protocol</td>
<td>objective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>unique number for quote</td>
<td>Unique identification number for quotation</td>
<td>objective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>page number</td>
<td>page number the quotation is found on</td>
<td>objective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>full text of quote</td>
<td>copy of paragraph in which the term PISA occurs at least once</td>
<td>objective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>type of speech</td>
<td>type of speech in which the term PISA gets mentioned</td>
<td>objective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>name of person mentioning 'PISA'</td>
<td>name of person saying the quotation</td>
<td>objective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>formal role of speaker</td>
<td>role the speaker has in the parliament</td>
<td>objective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>political party</td>
<td>acronym describing the political party the speaker is a member of</td>
<td>objective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>title of related agenda point</td>
<td>name of topic/agenda point under discussion</td>
<td>objective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>reception of PISA study in quotation</td>
<td>judgement of speaker’s attitude to PISA in general or a specific aspect of PISA</td>
<td>coder's interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>main reason for mention</td>
<td>What is the main reason PISA is mentioned?</td>
<td>coder's interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>aspect of PISA study discussed</td>
<td>Which aspects of PISA are mentioned?</td>
<td>coder's interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>description of what is</td>
<td>Which aspect of current reality is being described?</td>
<td>coder's interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>change suggested</td>
<td>What is suggested to need change linked to PISA mention?</td>
<td>coder's interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>political gambit</td>
<td>Who or what is supposed to be discredited?</td>
<td>coder's interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>interpretive comments</td>
<td>What is the essence of the quotation? What is important?</td>
<td>coder's interpretation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Quotation gets marked orange when German speaker refers to Sweden's PISA performance
Quotation gets marked orange when Swedish speaker refers to Germany's PISA performance
As Figure 5 shows, each quotation (i.e. paragraph) was coded according to its temporal, spatial and personal markers, recording the date of coding, the name of the country (i.e. Sweden or Germany), the date of the parliamentary debate protocolled as well as the year and month of the debate for easy reference in the subsequent analysis (see code sheet item 1-3.2). Each protocol had been archived using a unique identification number, the same number was also used as a unique quotation identification in the database underpinning this study (code sheet item 4). As the unique identification number for German parliamentary protocols holds information about the respective election period, this information was also collected as item 5. The amount of times ‘PISA’ was mentioned in a protocol varies between one and 65. To capture this information, code sheet item 6 captures this number for each protocol. Each quotation was also given a unique quotation identification, which is an addition to its respective protocol ID and was captured in item 7. Code sheet item 8 registers the page number and under the next item the full quotation, i.e. paragraph, was pasted in the original language, i.e. Swedish or German. Code sheet item 10 classifies the procedural context of the quotation, recording for example whether the quotation was uttered as part of a speech, a question to the government, a response to the question or even a shout-out interrupting a speech. Code sheet item 11 to 13 capture information about the speaker articulating the quotation including their name, formal role in parliament and the name of the political party they are affiliated with. The agenda item discussed when the quotation is uttered was recorded under code sheet item 14.

Code sheet items 1 to 14 were modelled on a code sheet available from the research project ‘Dynamics of Collective Action’ made available by Stanford University. The author took inspiration from how the code sheet was organised into variable title, description and possible values. Code sheet item 15 to 17 were developed by the researcher herself closely linked to the research questions and emerging patterns in the coding sample. Item 15 links to the concern of the research question about the way PISA is received in the countries studied. Each quotation was classified as either supportive or critical of PISA as an international comparative study or as neutral towards it. Then, the quotation was re-read in order to categorise the speaker’s main reason for mentioning PISA (code sheet item 16).

To capture when members in the German parliament referred to Sweden or vice versa, colour coding was used. When a German speaker referred to Sweden the quotation was marked in orange. When a Swedish speaker made a reference to Germany, a quotation was marked in blue. This was done to capture additional information that might be useful for comparative analysis, especially regarding policy borrowing and lending between these two countries.

5.2.3.1 Coding Sample

As a coding sample, the chronologically first 70 quotations identified were analysed and described in free text comments (see code sheet item 17). From these comments, the author induced four central reasons for mentioning PISA that were subsequently captured in code sheet item 16 (16.1-16.4, see Figure 5). The four main reasons for mentioning PISA were defined as: assessing or discussing aspects of the PISA study (16.1); describing a perceived status quo, e.g. using PISA results to depict current shortfalls of the education system (16.2); highlighting a need for change (16.3) or making a political gambit, e.g. blaming another party for a certain situation or outright discrediting another member of parliament (16.4); with anything not fitting these categories classified as ‘Other’. Depending on the classification of the reason for mentioning PISA, the essence of the quotation was further qualified selecting the most fitting qualifier from the respective code sheet item (16.1-16.4). For each of the four main reasons for mentioning PISA, Figure 6 shows the possible values that were created according to the patterns in the coding sample. These values were induced from the first 70 quotations.

6 https://web.stanford.edu/group/collectiveaction/cgi-bin/drupal/node/21
analysed, and then used deductively to classify the remaining 1303 quotations. Eventually, the coder briefly summarised the essence of the quotation in English (code sheet item 17).

Sometimes a speaker is fulfilling multiple reasons in one quotation, e.g. both describing a perceived status quo and highlighting a need for change. In these cases, the coder decided which was the main or overarching reason for mentioning. If for example the description of a current status was used to then highlight a need for change, the latter was selected as main reason for mentioning PISA in the speech.

*Figure 6: Code sheet items on main reason PISA is mentioned, including possible values*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code sheet item</th>
<th>Variable title</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Values</th>
<th>Degree of interpretation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>main reason for mention</td>
<td>What is the main reason PISA is mentioned?</td>
<td>(16.1) Assessing or discussing aspects of the PISA study; (16.2) Describing a perceived status quo; (16.3) Highlighting a need for change; (16.4) Making a political gambit; Other</td>
<td>coder’s interpretation of speaker's intention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>aspect of PISA study discussed</td>
<td>Which aspects of PISA are mentioned?</td>
<td>Evaluating set-up Methodology Validity of results Generalisability of results Originality of findings Country ranking Other</td>
<td>coder’s interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>description of what is</td>
<td>Which aspect of current reality is being described?</td>
<td>Not applicable School system Academic abilities Educational disadvantage Geographical difference Teaching quality School environment Parental role Other</td>
<td>coder’s interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>change suggested</td>
<td>What is suggested to need change linked to PISA mention?</td>
<td>Resource: general Age of school entry Streaming Length of school day Resource: gifted &amp; talented students Resource: early years Curriculum content Pedagogical method Resource: educational disadvantage &amp; integration School policy process Internal measurement &amp; evaluation Teaching quality School governance Parental role Other</td>
<td>coder’s interpretation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.2.3.2 Coding Review

Once all 1373 quotations were coded, the categories were reviewed to check if the coding sample was representative for the whole dataset. When less than five quotations had been coded into a category, the author either grouped this category together with another closely linked one or grouped it into ‘Other’. With the reasons of mentioning PISA to highlight a need for change for example (16.3), only 2 quotations had demanded more resources for integration. Seeing that integration usually concerns groups of students that are educationally disadvantaged due to their ability or ethnic background, the classifier ‘Resource: integration’ was integrated into ‘Resource: educational disadvantage’, creating a new label ‘Resource: educational disadvantage & integration’. Figure 6 shows the code sheet values after the coding review.

5.2.4 Example of data analysis

In the following, the coding process is demonstrated using two quotations. The code sheet item numbers are marked in brackets (1) to (17).

The quotation shown in Figure 7 was said by Brigitte Wimmer (11), a representative of the German Social Democratic party SPD (13) and member of parliament (12) in a parliamentary speech (10) discussing ‘the government’s stance on the PISA study results as well as the implementation of the recommendations by the Forum for Education’ (14). In the quoted sentences, Wimmer refers to PISA to make a point about the general relationship between immigration and school performance. She refers to the PISA study as a credible source of evidence, thus her reception of the PISA study has been classified as ‘supportive’. She mentions the PISA study to compare Germany to other countries ranked higher, so that the main reason for mentioning PISA can be described as ‘Assessing or discussing aspects of the PISA study’ (16) with a particular interest in ‘country ranking’ (16.1). The coder then summarises the gist of the paragraph in their comments (17): “Competition with different countries, implying that it is possible to do better for those students with migration background currently experiencing educational disadvantage”. Since the speaker mentions Sweden, the quotation has been marked orange.
(2): Sweden
(3): 2014-03-04
(4): 2013/14.77
(5): -
(6): 5
(7): 2013/14.77/04
(8): 12

(9): “When there is critique of our competencies in school, it is not about technology but rather the competency to critically evaluate sources. It is about being knowledgeable in general subjects so that one understands when something one reads online is not correct. This is what improvement of digital competence needs to be about. This is what came out of the PISA-studies relating to digital competencies.”


Figure 8: Example 2 of data analysis, quotation from the Swedish parliament

The quotation in Figure 8 is from a response to a question (10) during question time (14) by Jan Björklund (11), minister of education at the time (12) and representative of the Swedish liberal party L (13). He uses PISA as a valid source of evidence to give insights into Swedish students’ current level of digital competence. The quotation is thus classified as ‘supportive’ of PISA as a study (15). He uses PISA to describe the current performance with regards to digital literacy, in order to identify ‘good general knowledge’ allowing students to critically evaluate sources of information as a key intervention point. Thus, the main reason for mentioning PISA is classified as “highlighting a need for change” (16) with a particular interest in changing ‘curriculum content’ (16.3). The coder summarises the gist of the quotation in the following comment (17): “Arguing that Swedish students know how to use digital technology, what they are missing is knowledge on the basis of which they can critically assess sources”.

5.3 Limitations

The reliability of the results produced by the above described methodology has limitations, since coding was done by the same coder. The validity of the results might also be affected by this limitation. However, to address validity, multiple choice categories for the reasons, items 16.1-16.4, were created to increase the consistency of measures coded. Since this work is a master’s thesis to be undertaken solely by the author, it was not possible to have a second coder to ensure inter-coder reliability. However, the author is very happy to make the dataset available to other researchers upon request to enable an independent re-coding.

As the reader might have noticed, the code sheet items vary in the degree of interpretation necessary to carry out the coding. Coding items 15 to 17 rely on the coder’s interpretation to some degree, while items 1 to 14 can be objectively coded. While a larger degree of interpretation limits the replicability of the coding process, the author hopes to mitigate this limitation through a high degree of transparency in the description of the method.

It also needs to be noted that the coding sample consisted of the chronologically first 70 quotations rather than a random sample representative of the debate over the whole time period. While it was beyond the scope of the study to repeat the process with a randomized coding sample, the re-coding and re-categorisations process was used to create categories that are representative of topics discussed in the whole period of study.

This thesis aims to capture PISA as a phenomenon and approaches all its research questions from that vantage point. The results will therefore only give insight into how PISA is used, for example, to motivate school reform, not how school reforms are motivated in general. Such a comparative study, looking at general motivations used by parliamentarians for educational reforms might indeed be very interesting and complementary to this thesis.

Given that the school policy mandate lies with the individual states, the Bundesländer, it would be complementary to this study to conduct a similar research process for the discussion in the assembly of the state representatives, the Bundestag. This would give
insight into the extent to which direct policy mandate influences the discussion of PISA results among policy makers.

Lastly, in order to capture PISA mentions in parliament in Sweden and Germany exhaustively and comprehensively between 2000 and 2018, content analysis was chosen as an approach. While allowing for the analysis of large datasets, it has limits in capturing and investigating the semantic and rhetoric complexity of the parliamentary discourse around PISA. The findings of this study give reason to believe that a deeper discursive analysis of the data would be productive, and suggestions are elaborated in the section on further research.

5.4 Ethical considerations

All data used in this study is publicly available and unobtrusively obtainable. The researcher’s relation to the people studied is thus distant and any possible influence of the researcher on the subjects of study can be excluded. In reverse, however, the researcher’s objectivity might be compromised, or as the Swedish Research Council puts it: ‘the researcher’s position can entail ethical complications or risks’ (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017:26). To minimise the potential influence of personal bias and political opinion on the interpretation of results, the code sheet clearly indicates the degree of judgment required for each code sheet item. Care has been taken to ensure consistency of wording in researcher’s comments (code sheet item 17) to be formulated in a neutral tone. In order to avoid partiality in the analysis, e.g. describing patterns within one political party in more detail than in another, analysis was conducted according to themes always including all parties. The discussion of results, in line with the research aims, objectives and questions as well as the Research Council’s recommendations (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017:25), focuses on general patterns that can be illustrated with particular examples. These illustrative examples are chosen so that no one particular political party gets significantly more or less analytical attention.

5.5 Summary

This chapter described in detail how the 1373 quotations from 335 protocols sampled for this thesis were coded and analysed. The positivist ontological assumptions and epistemological considerations informed by phenomenology and positivism were shared. The choice for content analysis as method was explained. It was discussed how the initial coding sample informed the creation of categories for coding sheet items capturing the reasons for why a member of parliament mentions PISA. The coding process was visualised with the example of two quotations, one from each parliamentary context compared. Finally, ethical considerations and limitations were discussed. The next chapter presents the findings of the research, analysing patterns from the dataset.
Chapter 6: Findings & Analysis

This chapter summarises the findings from the 1373 quotations identified from 335 parliamentary protocols in Sweden and Germany. Both the Swedish and the German parliament receive PISA results largely uncritically. The debates in parliament mainly focus on the implications of the results and which policy action should be taken. There is not much critical engagement with the set-up and methodology of PISA. This can be explained through world culture theory, suggesting that members of parliament follow a world-culture script of how the legislative of a model nation-state should receive PISA, namely as an ‘independent objective analysis’ of the current state of the education system.

Unsurprisingly, PISA becomes more prominent in parliamentary debates in the respective country when results are below expectations, thus becoming more of a political concern. This pattern points to two underlying processes: a) the competition-incentivising form in which PISA presents its results and b) the interpretative link between PISA results and future economic growth. Countries that are leading in the latest PISA league tables often become sources of policy borrowing. German policy makers, for example, were traveling to Sweden in the beginning of the 2000s to get inspiration. Similarly, Sweden looks to Germany first as an example to avoid and later for inspiration when its own PISA results start declining.

Generally, PISA gets referenced to propose all sorts of reforms, used as a sort of ‘objective piece of evidence’ for a currently perceived reality that is believed to be improved by the suggested reform. In the German parliamentary debate, PISA was mentioned often in 2001 and 2002 to make a political gambit, i.e. to discredit a political opponent. Against the background of Luhmann’s system theory and the concept of externalisation, this might be part of a cultural shift within Germany when PISA becomes normalised as part of the internal logic, as well as to process a national shock due to unexpectedly low performance in the first PISA test. Generally, the data supports the idea that how parliamentarians discuss and use PISA is a reflection of world culture and simultaneously captures the ways in which this culture evolves.

The following sections describe the dataset in more detail, as well as highlighting overarching trends. It then turns to the research questions in sequence. At first, the reception of PISA in Germany and Sweden is analysed. Then, the findings for how PISA results are interpreted by parliamentarians are presented. Finally, I discuss what the data analysed shows about how parliamentarians refer to PISA in order to motivate school reforms.

6.1 The dataset at a glance

As just mentioned, a total of 335 relevant protocols of parliamentary debates in Sweden and Germany between 2000 and 2018 were identified for this study. More than two-thirds of them were protocols of the German parliament, 98 from the Swedish parliament, indicating that PISA was overall more discussed in Germany than in Sweden during the time-period studied. This can be attributed to the fact that Germany started out having relatively poor results which triggered more discussion. Sweden, on the other hand, hardly discussed PISA at all until 2010, when the downward trend in results clearly persevered. Figure 9 shows the amount of parliamentary protocols ($N_{protocol}$=335) mentioning PISA per year, i.e. the amount of parliamentary debates in which PISA was mentioned by at least one of the members, as well as the total amount of ‘PISA’-mentions per year ($N_{mentions}$=1373), in absolute numbers as well as in proportion to total number of protocols and quotations per country.
Figure 9: Number of protocols mentioning PISA per year, as well as ‘PISA’-mentions per year in absolute and proportional terms

6.1.1 Data-sets for Germany and Sweden in absolute numbers and in proportion to the respective country’s sample size

As mentioned earlier, the ratio of German and Swedish protocols analysed is approximately 2:1. The amount of times ‘PISA’ was mentioned in a protocol varies widely, from 1-10 times being most common to 65 times in one instance. Figure 9 therefore distinguishes between the number of protocols mentioning ‘PISA’ per year (displayed in the upper graphs) and the number of total mentions of ‘PISA’ per year (visualised in the lower graphs). While the former is more indicative of the spread of PISA into a number of debates, the latter carries information about the depths in which PISA is discussed.

The sample of protocols generated a total of 1373 quotations mentioning ‘PISA’, 986 quotations from German national parliamentary debates and 387 quotations from Swedish national parliamentary debates, presenting a similar 2:1 ratio of Swedish to German mentions as in number of protocols. To monitor the increases PISA mentions relative to the whole of the debate per country, Figure 9 shows graphs of absolute numbers to the left and representations proportional to respective country’s sample-size to the right. This shows that the spikes in the parliamentary ‘PISA’ debate are proportional to the total amount of mentions. In relative terms, PISA gets discussed as much in the Swedish parliament as in the German parliament when results are below expectations. The German debate shows early peaks, linked to the ‘PISA shock’ in 2001/2002. The Swedish debate peaks in 2013/2014 just after results for the PISA 2012 were released showing that Sweden’s results had fallen at the fastest pace of all OECD-member states. Generally, PISA seems to be most discussed when results are below expectations or display a decreasing tendency.

6.1.2 Increasing parliamentary debate at times of PISA results publication

Figure 10 visualises the occurrence of spikes, highlighting that PISA is most frequently mentioned after publication of results in both countries. PISA usually publishes results in December of the year following the test year. Thus, parliamentary debates focussing
on PISA results can occur in December or January of the following year, as Figure 10 shows.

![Figure 10: 'PISA'-mentions in parliamentary debates per year in relation to publishing of PISA results](image)

Keeping in mind the described possible time-delay in parliament discussing the most recently published PISA results, Figure 10 shows the spikes occurring around the time of publication of results. Generally, PISA comes up more often in parliamentary debates in the year of the results published or in the following calendar year than in other years. Both countries have one spike that stands out in relation to the height of other spikes. For Germany, this is in 2002, the year after the unexpectedly poor performance in PISA 2000 being published. For Sweden, the number of mentions spikes in 2014, the year after the PISA 2012 results were published and Sweden was highlighted as the country among all OECD members whose results had fallen the most since PISA 2000. The data thus suggests that the PISA study and related recommendations occupy policy makers most when their country performs below expectations.

Generally, this brief assessment of the data set indicates, as others have argued before that the PISA studies influence national policy makers’ thinking and inspire national policy debate (Bieber & Martens, 2011; Grek, 2010; Sellar & Lingard, 2014; Sjøberg, 2019). The purpose of this study is to describe and analyse in more detail how the PISA studies are discussed and how parliamentarians use references to PISA to motivate reforms.

### 6.1.3 Four themes in the nature of parliamentary debate around PISA

In which context and for what purpose does PISA get mentioned in parliamentary debate? The reasons for ‘PISA’-mentions were structured into four broad categories: 1) to make a political gambit by discrediting a political opponent; 2) to discuss aspects of the PISA study itself; 3) to describe a perceived status quo; or 4) to highlight a need for change. In a few cases, quotations highlighting a need for change eventually, set out by using PISA to describe a perceived status quo. Quotations have been classified based on whether a need for change is mentioned (‘highlighting need for change’) or not (‘describing perceived status quo’). Both reasons for mentioning PISA point to what policy makers pay attention to when motivating certain reforms. Figures 11 and 12 show the distribution of these reasons for mentioning PISA between 2000 and 2018 in Sweden and Germany.
In Sweden, parliamentary debates until 2009 focused largely on contemplating the relatively good performance of Sweden in the PISA tests and understanding aspects of set-up, methodology and country ranking. Unsurprisingly, as results continue to drop, PISA gets mentioned more frequently to motivate proposed changes as well as to make political gambits, seeking to blame a certain party or government for the declining performance. Around the publishing of PISA results from 2009, i.e. in December 2010, and results in 2012, published in December 2013, all reasons increase in count as the general debate increases. Particularly, mentions of PISA to describe the current status quo of the Swedish education system as well as highlighting the need for change increase. Furthermore, the fact that both 2010 and 2014 were election years might have influenced the debate. This might explain the mentions of PISA as a way of making a political gambit.

As Figure 13 shows, the German debate displays similar patterns as the Swedish one, with a time difference that relates to the developments in PISA results, thus suggesting a direct link between perceived poor performance and importance of PISA in parliamentary discussions. The year 2010 and 2014, similarly to Sweden, show an increase in general debate.
of PISA strengthening the suggested link between publication of results and intensity of ‘PISA’ debate in parliament in both countries. Note that the number of political gambits considerably decreases in the German debate between 2010 and 2014, as PISA results increase. This suggests that ‘PISA’ is more likely to be referred to for the purpose of discrediting a political opponent when results are below expectations. What nonetheless stands out is the high number of political gambits in Germany in comparison to Sweden in general, but also the concentration of these gambits in the years 2001 to 2004. This period can be described, drawing on Luhmann’s system theory and the concept of externalisation, where a new form of measurement and standards from the international realm entered the national system of logic. The initial ranking of Germany, especially with regards to reading skills, quickly led to the media and public discourse speaking of a ‘PISA shock’. The results had come out far below expectation, as Germany as a leading economy had expected to be among the leading education systems in the world. How PISA is used in parliamentary debates in these early years to discredit other members in parliament is worth closer examination. I will now turn to examining how PISA was received before presenting the patterns related to these four themes in more detail in Section 6.3.

6.2 An uncritical reception and discussion of PISA

As mentioned in Chapter 5, each quotation was classified as either ‘supportive’ or ‘critical’ of, or ‘neutral’ towards, PISA as an institution in order to qualify the general reception of PISA among members of national parliament. As Figure 13 shows, PISA was overwhelmingly positively received.

![Figure 13: The reception of PISA results in Germany and Sweden 2000-2018, in number of quotations](image)

In 90% of the quotations analysed for Germany, and 95% for Sweden, the PISA as an institution of international measurement and comparison was supported. The set of ‘neutral’ mentions include all counts when PISA was mentioned as part of an agenda point as well as ambivalent cases, where no clear signs of support or critique could be identified in the quotation. Albeit being presented with different results during the study period, this positive reception was similarly high in both Germany and Sweden. This suggests that the PISA studies are perceived as an important scientific analysis from the OECD, and that members of parliament across all parties see it as world-culturally appropriate to take the studies seriously, to recognise the results as valid and to act on the results without too much critical questioning of the set-up, methodology or other aspects of the research design. It also suggests that processes of
externalisation of the economy-based logic underpinning PISA into national logics of education policy have occurred. Although only a small percentage of all quotations analysed were classified as ‘critical’, it is worthwhile to analyse this sub-set of the data in more detail.

In total, 44 quotations were classified as ‘critical’, out of which 41 were made in the German parliament and three in the Swedish parliament. When examining these critical stances over time, the critical comments in Sweden occur in 2003 and 2013. In 2003, when PISA results were relatively good for Sweden, one member of parliament discredits the comparison made by the PISA ranking, arguing that it is not enough to be better than countries like Mexico and Czech Republic, as the economic resources invested in education cannot be compared to the investment Sweden makes. The comments in 2013, when results for Sweden had started to fall, criticised PISA for not measuring all relevant knowledge and for adding to the administrative burden of teachers and schools. These latter comments were made by members of the governing alliance coalition at the time. While three quotations are too few to identify patterns, this might suggest that voices critical of PISA are more likely to be raised when the government feels under pressure by the most recent PISA results.

In Germany, most critical comments occur between 2001 and 2003, in relation to the discussion of poor results, and then again between 2010 and 2014 when there has been a turn of the trend in German PISA results. There are two broad topics of critique that stand out in the German context: the critique that education has to mean more than what PISA measures (14 quotations) and a critical stance on validity of PISA’s student sample and the generalisability of results to the whole of Germany, rather than specific states (8 mentions). Further issues mentioned in the spirit of critique are that the poor state of the German education system was known before PISA, i.e. it did not need PISA for diagnosis (4 mentions); that the German economy is doing well ‘in spite of’ PISA, thus questioning the importance and relevance of the PISA study as predictor of economic competitiveness (3 mentions); that PISA cannot serve as a main tool of analysis for understanding policy challenges in Germany (3 mentions); and that the OECD, PISA and affiliated staff might be biased (3 mentions). The last critique is particularly relevant to this study, as it is the interest in the critical engagement with the world culture a nation state absorbs, follows or helps shape that is at the heart of this inquiry.

Two of the mentions of PISA in this context are made in 2018 by a member of the AfD (Alternative für Deutschland), the nationalist-conservative party, describing PISA as a lobby organisation for worldwide standards and seeing PISA as a threat to the national education system. The other comment is from the year 2005 where a member of the CDU/CSU claims that Andreas Schleicher, head of PISA and Director of Education and Skills in the OECD, was biased and partisan to the incumbent minister of education (SPD) propagating the comprehensive school system. Against the background of the overwhelming majority in the parliament being uncritical towards PISA, these comments appear almost extreme and more like political gambits, aiming to discredit the incumbent government at the time. At the same time, as briefly elaborated in Chapter 2, there has been critique of both the PISA methodology as well as influence on education policy making from the global academic community. Yet, these scientific critical voices are not being picked up in the parliamentary debates studied. This could be explained with the engagement process that PISA employs and that, within the framework of world culture theory, fulfils the function of giving legitimacy to sub-organisations within a nation-state, such as universities, NGOs, advisory groups and councils. As Sjöberg (2019) elaborates, the administrative process of the PISA tests involves lead-organisers from each country, often with academic research merits, that support the collection of data and contribute to the creation of the test through the design of questions, etc. Through PISA, the OECD creates a supportive network within each country and demands a considerable investment from participating countries, making critical examinations of PISA by parliamentarians more unlikely, as they have invested money and prestige.
Overall, very few voices in parliament questioned the set-up of the PISA test or the role of the OECD in the national policy process. The three critical comments in the Swedish context chime in with critiques of education being more than what PISA measures, arguing that PISA is a product and driver of the administrative burden on teachers and in questioning the general set-up and comparability. As we can conclude that the reception of PISA is principally supportive and positive, it is noteworthy that the little critique voiced occurs at points of either shocking news of poor results or, in the case of Germany, when results are improving and have stabilised at a ‘good enough’ level, lifting the pressure off the government to act.

6.3 Purposes for which PISA is discussed in parliament

6.3.1 Using PISA to discredit other members of parliament

In the German parliamentary debate between 2000 and 2018, 22 percent of all PISA mentions can be classified as political gambits. In Sweden, political gambits account for 14 percent of all PISA-mentions in the Swedish parliament, almost half as many as in Germany. However, both countries show patterns of concentration regarding political gambits. In Sweden, 42 percent of all political gambits are made in 2014, 20 percent in 2013 – the years of the Swedish ‘PISA shock’. In Germany, 43 percent of political gambits fall into 2002, and the whole period of 2001 to 2004 accounts for 75 percent of PISA being mentioned for the purpose of discrediting a political opponent in the German parliament. The nature of these political gambits however is slightly different, with Germany displaying a pattern that does not come up in Sweden at all.

In 2001 to 2004, the German data-set includes a considerable amount of protocols where PISA gets mentioned out of context, in order to discredit the academic ability of the speaker. These gambits are made by members of all parties present in the parliament at the time. Most such political gambits occur in the form of a shout-out, with the shouting member of parliament interrupting another member’s speech. For the sake of comparison, it is important to note that the Swedish parliamentary tradition does not allow interruptions and shout-outs while any member of parliament is speaking.

A shout-out from the CDU/CSU in 2001 for example discredits a motion presented by the government at the time declaring that “this is the most impressive piece of evidence for the PISA-Study” (Quotation 14/209/01). This quotation suggests that members of parliament are looking for evidence that the PISA study’s findings can be true, by identifying people that might ‘pull down’ the average to lead to the OECD’s judgement of reading skills in Germany being below OECD average. In this social process, suggestions about another person’s mediocrity or underperformance quickly become implied in short phrases such as “PISA sends its regards” (for example in quotation 14/209/02, 2001; SPD). Looking for the people who might have lowered the PISA performance below OECD average seems to be a way of working through a national crisis of confidence. It could also be read as a way of dealing with poor ranking without discrediting the PISA study itself, thereby complying with generally accepted world-culture scripts of the model nation-state being open to being measured and compared with other states and accepting the results.

In this process, the logic underpinning these political gambits moves away from the logic underpinning PISA’s methodology. The PISA test gets portrayed as a test with clear pass marks, so that individuals can be portrayed as ‘failing’ the PISA test. One speaker in 2002, for example, aiming to discredit an earlier speech, says: “Your speech has furthermore reminded me of the PISA study: Missed topic [of the question], mark five [- failed], you may sit down” (Quotation 14/215/02, 2002). PISA is used here as a semantic vehicle to discredit

7 “Quotation” refers to a quotation in the dataset collected and analysed for this thesis. The number is the unique identification number assigned according to the coding method described in Chapter 5, section 5.2.3.
members of parliament based on their academic abilities and logic reasoning. This pattern subsides over time as Germany’s PISA results improve.

In the Swedish debate, political gambits with reference to PISA transpire in a less personal fashion and appear to place the blame for declining results either with the incumbent or earlier governments. In 2014, the then-education minister, for example, claims that reforms undertaken by his government since 2006 have not yet shown effect in the PISA study, framing the results of PISA 2012 for Sweden as ‘the last nail in the coffin’ for the red-green government of the early 2000s (Quotation 2013/14:54/03). A member of the Social Democrats and in the opposition in early 2014, argues that ‘even if the minister would like to blame the Social Democrats [for the poor performance in problem solving] in this case, I highly doubt that this would be true’ (Quotation 2013/14:93/06). While Swedish members of parliament refer to PISA to place the blame on a government, past or present, for ‘faulty’ education policy, the nature of discrediting political opponents in the Germany of the early 2000s is more personal, which points to a collective process of dealing with failure.

These findings on the way that PISA is used to make political gambits against individuals, parties and the government are worth further examination, and follow-up studies, which were beyond the scope of the study at hand. Some ideas for further research in this area will be discussed in Chapter 8.

6.3.2 Parliamentarians’ interpretation of PISA results

In both countries studied, approximately one fifth of all quotations analysed fit into the category of discussing aspects of the PISA study’s set-up, methodology or presentation of findings. With 22 percent of all PISA mentions concerning the study itself, discussing aspects of PISA happened more often in Sweden than in Germany (18%) relative to the number of mentions in the respective country. When members of parliament discussed the PISA study itself, rather than discussing its implications and suggesting changes, four general aspects were identified as sub-categories: 1) evaluating the test set-up and methodology; 2) commenting on the results including their generalisability; 3) commenting on the utility of the PISA findings, i.e. the extent to which they present new insights or useful information; and 4) discussing the ranking of countries, i.e. the country’s place in the league tables published as part of the PISA results. Quotations classified into category two focused on the results of the PISA study without comparison to other nations, while quotations in category four explicitly discussed country comparison and competition.

Figures 14 and 15 show the mentions of PISA to discuss the set-up or results of the study itself split into its sub-categories over time in absolute numbers of quotations. Most attention in both countries is paid to the interpretation of results and discussing country ranking, with 36 percent and 44 percent of quotations discussing results in Germany and Sweden respectively. In Sweden, 34 percent of all quotations concerned with aspects of the study, deal with country ranking, compared to 24 percent of German quotations in this category. Both a country’s results and its ranking in comparison to other nation states is information that can easily be picked up by the media and public discourse to broadly judge the quality of the education system. Arguably, it is these aspects that create reform pressure on parliamentarians. From the perspective of world society theory, these results and rankings are linked to the creation and maintenance of the identity of the nation-state, and thereby also to its actorhood and perceived legitimacy. Both Germany and Sweden, as relatively mature nation-states with mature economies, aim to maintain ‘world-class’ or ‘model’ education systems, and the PISA results are seen as indicators to which extent they succeed.
In contrast, the discussion of test-set up and methodology is less important over time in both countries, but less so in Germany (19% of all aspects) than in Sweden (10%). Comments on the usefulness of findings are almost entirely absent from the Swedish debate, while amounting to 10% of the discussion of the PISA study itself in Germany.

6.3.2.1 Questioning the usefulness of PISA findings in Germany

Comments questioning the utility of findings in Germany mostly occur in the early years of PISA and usually suggest that the short-comings of the education system in general, or issues of educational disadvantage and segregation in particular, have been known before the PISA study. A member of the Green Party says for example that ‘[the education-political problems] lie, as we all have known for a long time and not only since PISA, among others in the integration of migrants living in Germany…’ (Quotation 15/166/08, 2005). This
quotation is representative of the whole sample in this subcategory, where PISA gets mentioned in a sub-clause to claim that PISA did not bring any new insights, but which simultaneously asserts that the insights the speaker highlights are being backed by PISA, thereby using it as an objective piece of evidence to support the speakers claim. The one quotation in this category from the Swedish context uses PISA in the same way. It would be interesting to compare the data-set at hand with general mentions of educational disadvantage or other issues highlighted in the PISA study to understand the extent to which PISA functions as an agenda-setting mechanism. This might be fertile ground for future research (see Chapter 8).

6.3.2.2 The importance of country rankings in the parliamentary debate

The ranking of participating countries according to their performance in parameters measured by PISA is arguably the most easily accessible way of presenting findings. According to the data, this aspect steers where politicians suggest turning to for policy borrowing and which policies to avoid implementing lest they might lead to a similar performance as in a country currently ranked lower.

In the early Swedish debate (2003), the case of Germany gets mentioned three times by the then-education minister and member of the Social Democrats to warn against a reform to introduce more choice and different streams into the Swedish education system proposed by the Liberal party. Germany is used as an example of a country having a highly segregated school system and performing lower in the PISA results. From 2011 to 2017, PISA country rankings get mentioned to suggest countries that Sweden might turn to for policy borrowing in order to improve its results. These include Finland, Canada as well as East Asian countries.

In Germany, mentions of other countries one might learn from occur in the early years of the time-period studied. Here, Germany also looks to Sweden and other Nordic countries for inspiration. Since 2007, however, Sweden gets only mentioned in the German debate to highlight how much its performance has dropped, disregarding the Swedish system as a model for German school reform. This is also when country rankings start being discussed as a way of reviewing the progress Germany has made and to formulate ambitious goals of becoming a leader in the PISA ranking.

Although it has been studied how the education systems of the top-ranking countries differ and are rooted in the countries own culture and history (e.g. Crehan, 2016), parliamentarians seem to view country rankings as an inspiration for looking where individual policies and smaller changes might be borrowed from. Regarding the observation, proposed by world culture theory, that nation-states engage in very similar education project, country rankings certainly steer policy makers attention in certain directions and give reason for competitive goals such as leading the PISA league table. Members of parliament in Sweden and Germany follow the guidance of league tables, albeit not indiscriminately so. Some speakers, for example, question the desirability of learning from leading East Asian nations due to supposed cultural incompatibility.

6.3.2.3 Using PISA to make broad generalisations

Closely linked to the discussion of country rankings is the discussion of the validity and generalisability of results. In Sweden, the interpretation of results until 2009 is dominated by the debate about what kind of results are good enough. Is it satisfactory to be above OECD average, for example? From 2010 onward, members of parliament discuss results in order to find general links, correlations or causalities. A member of the Left Party (V) signposts to PISA to generalise the relationship between childhood poverty and life chances: “… Children that have experienced poverty get worse educational results, worse accommodation, worse networks with the labour market and so on. The PISA study that came out the other day
shows this very clearly” (Quotation 2010/11:30/03, 2010).

In Germany, similar correlations were discussed. The early debate around results, however, focuses a lot on the extent to which results are generalisable for every state, as education systems differ slightly between states and the initial PISA sample was not representative for every state. As mentioned in Chapter 4, the governments of the states (Bundesländer), rather than the national government, steer the respective education system. Thus, many members of parliament were interested in knowing whether the sample of students PISA tested were representative for the demographic make-up of individual states. The national government thus ordered an additional study, the so-called ‘PISA-E’, the PISA-Extension, to compare the performance of the sixteen states against each other. The results of that latter study were then used to point to patterns and suggest policy learning from particular states.

6.3.2.4 Evaluating PISA’s contribution to national education policy

Considering PISA as an external source of information for the national education system, the explicit discussion that is evaluative of PISA’s set-up and methodology and its contribution to national policy is interesting. In Germany, this engagement with PISA can be described in three movements. The first movement represents a set of quotations that explain PISA’s methodology and set-up to the parliament and is most present in the early 2000s, when the study was new and not yet ‘fully understood’ or known. The second movement praises PISA as a helpful policy instrument and sees PISA as playing an important part in a range of quality assurance tools. This aspect gets raised more since 2012, when Germany had made significant improvements in PISA results and politicians reviewed the decade of reform and policy making process since the first PISA study in 2000. Lastly, a third movement encompasses quotations that challenge the PISA set-up and highlight what is not yet measured and should be included. This group of quotations also includes quotations questioning the underlying assumption of comparability between states with very different education systems. This last movement is present throughout the time-period studied and highlights in particular physical education and Germany’s vocational training system as not being captured by the PISA study. In Sweden, only five quotations concern the PISA test itself and its methodology, all occurring in 2013/2014, when PISA results were at an all-time low. These five PISA-mentions fall neatly into the three movements described for the German data-set, albeit lacking the chronological dimension discovered in the German data.

In conclusion, it can be said that there are considerable similarities between Sweden and Germany in the engagement with the PISA study itself. Both highlight aspects of education that are currently not captured by the PISA studies, both interpret the results to make generalisations about factors that influence student performance, and in both countries the attention of the policy debate is steered by the most recent country rankings. The German debate stands out by its initial focus on questioning the usefulness of the PISA results. While this section has qualified the ways in which results are interpreted over time in both countries, the next section looks more closely at the problems that are highlighted and the changes that are proposed using PISA.

6.3.3 Using PISA as evidence for short-comings in the current education system

Figures 16 and 17 show which aspects of the perceived status quo get highlighted through reference to PISA. In both countries, PISA is brought up as evidence to describe issues in the current state of the school system, equating poor results with poor teaching, structural issues such as educational disadvantage, or poor learning conditions more broadly. This makes up 17 percent and 18 percent of the total Swedish and German debate respectively. Teaching quality more specifically also gets discussed in Sweden and Germany, making up six and three
percent of this category of quotations over time, respectively. It is noteworthy that this issue is
discussed a lot in Sweden in 2014, after the publication of poor PISA results in 2012. Otherwise,
teaching quality seems to be picked up in similar shares over time. Having briefly summarised
the similarities between the two countries studied, the following sections explore differences in
more detail.

6.3.3.1 Equity versus excellence?

Figures 16 and 17 show that PISA is used a lot more in the German debate than
in the Swedish one to problematise the level of educational disadvantage. While the figures
represent the debate in absolute numbers of quotations, this is true even when numbers are
compared in terms of their proportion of the national debate on the issue. In Germany, 31
percent of all quotations classified as ‘describing a perceived status quo’ broach the issue of
inequality of educational opportunities, while only 18 percent do so in the Swedish context.
This might be related to the fact that the first PISA study in 2000 found that academic success in Germany was more dependent on socio-economic background than in any other participating country. At the same time, Nordic education systems, such as the Swedish one, had placed a lot of importance on educational equity for decades and were initially leading the PISA league tables. This was taken as a key learning by parliamentarians in Germany that an education system could achieve both excellence and equity, rather than those two aims being trade-offs as it had been assumed in the German debate preceding the PISA study 2000. Already in the first parliamentary debate on PISA in late 2001, one member uses PISA as evidence ‘that a high general performance and a tighter range of performance levels can be achieved simultaneously’ (Quotation 14/208/24). In Germany, arguably, educational equity enters the discussion for national goals due to the presentation of PISA results 2000, and PISA measuring equity and ranking countries accordingly. This indicates PISA’s influence in terms of agenda setting.

In Sweden, it is academic abilities that get discussed dominantly when PISA is used to highlight the status quo, with 43 percent of all quotations describing a perceived status quo concerning this as opposed to only 22 percent in the German debate. The declining trend in academic competencies measured is of primary concern throughout the time-period studied, as indicated by the large share of quotations positioning this issue as central as shown in Figure 16. Interestingly, this focus and eventual improvement in parameters of academic ability seem to come at the cost of focussing on educational equity. One member of parliament argues in 2014, the year after all-time low PISA results for Sweden had been published, that ‘the PISA study shows as well that the explanation for results in academic abilities is spelled increased inequality. School results are much more stratified and segregated than before….’ (Quotation: 2013/14:128/02). The first PISA results in 2001 indicated that equity and excellence do not have to be trade-offs. It seems that this contributed to shifting the debate in the German parliament regarding the relationship between academic excellence and equity.

6.3.3.2 Perceived lack of school safety as reason for falling results in Sweden

Figures 16 and 17 also show that the status quo of the school environment is discussed more in the Swedish parliament than in the German one, amounting to 11 and two percent of the debate in this category respectively. It would be interesting to relate these data points to when incidences indicating lack of safety in schools, e.g. acts of violence between students or against teachers, occurred and where reported in the media. There might also be a party-political dimension to these results, as all quotations mentioning the school environment were uttered by members of the conservative political spectrum, including the liberal party, Moderaterna, the Christian Democrats and the Sweden Democrats.

6.3.3.3 ‘Better than you’ – competition between different state-systems in Germany

In the German context, PISA gets referred to quite a lot to highlight the geographical difference in PISA results (making up 13 percent of the data in the category ‘Describing perceived status quo’ in Germany). Note that this category does not exist in the Swedish context, due to the education policy mandate resting with the central government. As Figure 17 shows, this issue appears in 2004, after the publication of the so-called ‘PISA-E’, a PISA study commissioned to compare the sixteen German states against each other. Since the governing mandate of the education systems sits decentralised with the states (Bundeländer) in Germany, this issue plays a role through the time-period studied, with many members of parliament arguing that the CDU-governed states should be a model for education reform as they are performing better in the internal PISA-comparison for Germany. This dimension might also be correlated to national election campaigns, as counts are slightly higher in election years 2005, 2009 and 2013. From the perspective of world culture theory, it is striking that the idea of comparison and competition underpinning the phenomenon of PISA seems to have been
embedded into the logic of national education policy making in Germany to the extent that the PISA parameters have been embraced to facilitate comparison and competition between the individual states, which was not the case before PISA.

6.3.4 Using PISA to highlight need for change

Figure 18 and Figure 19 plot (in absolute numbers of quotations) when PISA is used in order to suggest a change in education policy in Sweden and Germany. In general, and in both countries, changes to education policy are proposed more often when PISA results are poor than when they are relatively good.

In both countries, the majority of changes proposed concerns the school system as a whole, with this category entailing 36 percent and 33 percent of the parliamentary discussion on change in Germany and Sweden respectively. In both debates, this includes calls for more financial resources for the school system in general (18 and 22 percent of the country debate on ‘need for change’ respectively), as well as more resources for early years education in particular (approximately 10 percent of the sample size on ‘highlighting a need for change’ in either country).

![Figure 18: Themes in using PISA to highlight a need for change in the Swedish parliament, 2000-2018](image-url)
6.3.1 ‘All-day schools’ for Germany

In Germany, PISA was used from 2001 to 2003 to propose a reform that introduces the concept of ‘all-day schools’ to Germany, inspired by the school day including learning provisions until the afternoon in other better-performing systems, such as the Nordic systems. This reform was also seen as a remedy for educational disadvantage and was driven by the coalition government of Social Democrats and the Green Party. Even then-chancellor Schröder used PISA to make the case for ‘all-day schools’ in parliament. He said: “In none of the countries that perform well in the PISA comparison, are children being sent home from school at lunchtime or even earlier. All-day schools allow for education and pastoral care to be more easily connected...” (Quotation: 14/242/04). The PISA study is here being used to drive selective policy borrowing from the top-ranking Nordic countries as well as to provide external evidence for a reform the government wants to implement.

6.3.4.2 Using PISA to change the constitution? – Stronger mandate for German national government to shape education policy

In the German parliament, the initial PISA debate brings up changes to administration a lot more in comparison to Sweden. Here, PISA is used to suggest that the national government should become more involved in education policy making in order to improve PISA results. 68 quotations (23% of all quotations suggesting changes in Germany) bring up this issue, with 44 quotations falling into the time period of 2001 to 2003. The initial debate focused largely on whether the constitution should be changed so that the national government can support and influence education policy. Members of parliament argued that Germany needs one school system for all pupils (e.g. quotation: 14/219/01). More moderate demands focused on the need for better cooperation between the federal government and the states (e.g. quotation: 14/242/15) or the need for cross-party collaboration to drive education reform and improve PISA results (e.g. quotation 14/245/12). The need for cross-party collaboration also influences the debate around PISA in Sweden where members of parliament challenge other parties to create cross-block collaborations to aim for a consensus on necessary school system reforms (e.g. quotations 2013/14:44/05; 2013/14:48; 2014/15:42/01).
6.3.4.3 Using PISA to suggest measures increasing quality of teaching in Sweden

While ways of improving teaching quality are suggested throughout the time period studied in both Germany and Sweden, this issue is particularly dominant in Sweden in 2014 (see Figure 18). PISA is used as evidence that more, better-qualified and motivated teachers are needed. Members of parliament call for more practically-focused teacher training (e.g. quotation 2013/14:70/04); better conditions for teachers (e.g. quotation 2013/14:71/08); or seek to attract more talent to the teaching profession (e.g. quotation 2013/14:132/02) through measures such as introducing performance-related pay (e.g. quotation 2014/15:42/03). Similar demands are raised using reference to PISA in the German parliament, however their proportional share is with seven percent of mentions in this category only about half the size of quotations concerning teaching quality in Sweden (13.5 %).

The category ‘academic abilities’ in Figure 18 and 19 summarises mentions suggesting changes to curriculum content and pedagogical method. Such mentions contribute 17 percent of the Swedish debate on proposed changes through reference to PISA, while in Germany, this aspect only account for a share of seven percent in this category. Interestingly, parliamentarians including the education minister at the time mostly suggest a return to more ‘traditional ways of teaching’ including more teacher-led lessons (e.g. quotations 2012/13:83/02 and 2012/13:83/03) and giving more scheduled lesson-time to those competencies in which Sweden performs especially poorly, such as mathematics (e.g. quotation 2012/13:97/02 and 2015/16:111/03). But parliamentary speeches also argue that school and the curriculum need to become more relevant to pupils’ realities (e.g. quotation 2013/14:48/25). The German debate around changes to curriculum or pedagogy calls for a different approach to teaching natural sciences (e.g. quotations 15/033/12; 15/115/01). In contrast to the Swedish debate however, parliamentarians suggest moving away from the teacher-led lesson model and take inspiration from modern pedagogical methods as practiced in other countries, more successful in the PISA study (e.g. quotations 16/133/14 and 17/234/01).

6.4 Summary

The chapter summarised the findings from the dataset of 335 protocols from which 1373 quotations mentioning ‘PISA’ have been identified and analysed. The dataset includes 98 protocols from the Swedish parliament, and 237 from the German parliament. As the country sub-sets of data are of so different sizes, the findings were analysed both in absolute numbers of quotations as well as in proportion to the sample size of each country. In general, the parliamentary debates in Germany and Sweden reference PISA more often at times when PISA results have just been published. PISA also generally receives more attention when results are below expectations.

It was also shown that both the German and the Swedish parliament discuss PISA largely without critically reflecting on its underlying methodology. The few quotations that could be coded as critical occur when PISA performance is at or above expectations again and highlight that PISA does not measure everything that is important for education. Critical voices when PISA results are below expectations exist in the German parliament and question the usefulness of PISA’s findings, claiming that short-comings in the education sector were known before.

In both parliamentary debates, the purpose for which PISA is mentioned can be classified into one of the following categories: 1) to make a political gambit discrediting a political opponent; 2) to assess and discuss PISA results; 3) to describe a perceived state of the education system (status quo); 4) to highlight a need for change. Political gambits generally increase when PISA results decrease, and members of parliament are keen to place the blame for the poor performance with the political opponent. Political gambits in the early PISA debate
in Germany take a particular personal form that could be explained through a process of externalisation, explored in more detail in the next chapter.

In both parliaments, the PISA country rankings published together with other PISA results attract particular attention among parliamentarians and seem to direct attention to countries at the top, from which policies could be borrowed to improve results. PISA results are also used to back up broad generalisations and causations. Generally, members of parliament see PISA as a useful policy tool. In the German debate, parliamentarians explicitly credit PISA for stimulating a decade of school reform between 2001 and 2011.

References to PISA are also used by parliamentarians to highlight issues and back-up suggestions for school reforms. In Germany, PISA was used a lot to highlight the extent of educational disadvantage and suggest reforms to ameliorate it. PISA results were also used to heighten a sense of competition between different state-systems in Germany. In Sweden, references to PISA are used to highlight shortfalls in safety of school environment and learning environment. Suggested changes in Germany initially focus on increasing the length of the school day following the model of the ‘all-day school’ present in the Nordic education systems. Due to the political mandate for education reforms lying with the state governments rather than the federal government in Germany, a possible shift of responsibility to the national government gets proposed and discussed using PISA as a reason to do so. In Sweden, issues that dominate the discussion of proposed changes include teaching quality as well as curriculum content and pedagogical approach. The following chapter discusses similarities and differences between the two countries compared in more detail.
Chapter 7: Discussion

The main research question driving this thesis was: *How does the reception and discussion of PISA results within the German and Swedish parliament change over time?* In short, the results of this analysis show that the reception does not change much over time and is largely uncritical. PISA is discussed as an objective piece of evidence that can provide insight into the current state of the respective education system. PISA country rankings are the aspect of PISA that dominantly influences parliamentary discussion. Being among the top-ten in all categories was declared as a national policy goal in both the Swedish and the German parliamentary debate. This indicates that parliamentarians in Sweden and Germany draw a close link between the place in the rankings and the perceived legitimacy and status of their respective nation-state. The data analysis also indicates that the intensity of the PISA debate increases when results are below expectations or show a declining trend. The better the PISA results, the lesser the discussion on PISA, and the lesser the interest in policy borrowing. PISA also gets used more for political gambits when results are poor and country rankings low. Arguably, there is a certain prestige and status in being a policy lender – an aspect that comes out particularly in the German debate where better performing states (*Bundesländer*) claim this status for themselves.

*Which patterns then arise in the interpretation of PISA results?* The data shows that PISA’s comparative parameters influence what parliamentarians pay attention to. This is most notable in the German parliamentary debate, where educational disadvantage gets discussed a lot and accepted as an aim that can be achieved in parallel to scoring high in other parameters, e.g. the share of high-achieving students.

Regarding the last sub-research question, on *how school reforms are motivated through reference to PISA by parliamentarians*, the data indicates the selective reading of PISA results among parliamentarians that other research has also found evidence for (Steiner-Khamsi, 2003, 2012, 2016; Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006). PISA results usually get used to describe the short-comings of the perceived status quo and to highlight a need for change. This happens even when results are improving, and parliamentarians highlight areas that are not improving as support for a suggested reform. In general, PISA results are used to problematise the current situation when results are below expectations. When results improve, the data shows that critical voices increase in the sense that parliamentarians then might claim that education should consist of more than what PISA measures, in order to motivate the continued need for reform.

Having answered the research questions in a nutshell, the chapter now discusses the parallels and contrasts between the Swedish and the German parliamentary discussion in more detail. The role and significance of parliamentarians as a sub-group of policy makers will also be deliberated. This will lead into a discussion of the findings at hand in relation to earlier research as well as a discussion of the role of the theoretical framework of world society theory for ICE. Finally, the benefits and limitations of the applied method are also being reviewed.

7.1. Members of parliament as a special group of policy makers

The process of policy making is complex, including many different stakeholders, factors, influences, documents and decisions. The findings presented in Chapter 6 are based on the parliamentary debate in Sweden and Germany from 2000 to 2018, studying the discussion between members of parliament as policy makers. The decision to focus on this particular group of ‘research participants’ bears a set of advantages and limitations that I want to bring to the reader’s attention before delving into deeper discussion of the findings and analysis.

The focus of this research was to understand the early process of policy borrowing and lending, i.e. the process of discussion before reforms are written and implemented. The research questions frame an exploration into the moment when PISA results and
recommendations enter the national realm. The parliament is seen as one important arena for early policy debate. It is also an important arena where stimulations and ‘irritations’ from the international arena or from international organisations are received.

The analysis of protocols of parliamentary debates brings a range of advantages to the research process. They provide rich data, with statements being linkable to individual people and political parties. Published documents later in the policy process are more indicative of the actual policy implemented, but do not make explicit the personal footprints of people involved and their opinions. As the parliament is an arena for conflict and debate, parliamentary protocols capture the range of opinions and stances on a given subject. Furthermore, in parliamentary democracies such as Germany and Sweden, parliamentary debates are meticulously documented and easily accessible. Although they are only a small part of the whole education policy process, focusing on parliamentary debates allows us to capture a phenomenon exhaustively within that arena. For this thesis, all protocols of parliamentary debates in Sweden and Germany that mention ‘PISA’ could be accessed, searched and analysed.

As explained in Chapter 4, the national parliaments in Sweden and Germany differ in their mandate over and therefore influence on education policy and school reform. While the Swedish parliament can pass laws directly affecting municipalities and schools in the whole of Sweden, the German parliament cannot. This difference in mandate explain some differences in the debate. As a complement to this thesis, a content analysis of the national representation of the states, the Bundesrat, could be conducted.

Nonetheless, parliament can be seen as a mirror of a broader public debate on an issue such as PISA. With parliamentarians coming from and representing constituencies from all over the nation, aspects of the local manifestation of the public debate are also brought to the discussion. Furthermore, every member of parliament has a group of people around them that directly or indirectly influence the policy making process. While these factors are not discernible in the data analysis of a verbatim protocol of a parliamentary debate, it supports the argument that members of parliament, due to their representative responsibilities, are research subjects that can offer rich data on the policy-making process and are worth studying in more depth.

7.2 Parallels and contrasts between the cases of Sweden and Germany

In general, the parliamentary debates in Sweden and Germany show very similar patterns in relation to PISA, with one exception. The way in which PISA is used to play political gambit to discredit other members of parliament in the German context does not have a mirror image in the Swedish parliament. This is mainly due to the differing parliamentary procedures and traditions. Shout-outs and interruptions are the rhetorical medium that make such political gambits possible in the German context. These are not allowed and therefore also not documented in Swedish parliamentary protocols. This aspect will be discussed more in the concluding chapter as suggested future research. Other aspects of similarities and differences are discussed below.

7.2.1 Importance of PISA as a phenomenon in both countries

With 98 protocols in the Swedish context containing references to PISA and 237 in the German context, the German parliamentary debate is bigger in size of dataset in absolute numbers of quotations. Generally, in the time period studied, PISA seems to have been of more importance in the German parliament. However, the German parliament has with a minimum of 598 parliamentary seats and a current number of 709, double the size of the Swedish parliament with an amount of 349 seats. Arguably, in any debate, more references would be made to the key term in Germany as a larger number of members of parliament participate in the discussion. Additionally, the differing traditions allow for more references to PISA as
political gambits in Germany. Nonetheless, the German dataset is 2.41 times the size of the Swedish debate considering numbers of protocols, and even with a factor 2.54 larger than the Swedish debate when counting numbers of quotations analysed. Shout-outs account for 59 of the German quotations analysed. Adjusting the total amount of quotations, accordingly, brings the ratio of German to Swedish quotations to 2.39:1.

One possible explanation for PISA being a more important phenomenon in the German context is that the ‘PISA shock’ hit Germany early, namely with the publication of the first PISA study’s results in December 2001. The German ‘PISA shock’ has been documented and analysed in the research literature to some extent (e.g. Ertl, 2006; Münch, 2014; Ringarp, 2016) and explains the amount of initial attention the PISA study received in parliamentary debate. This shock also established PISA as an important reference point and a yardstick for measuring improvement. Therefore, a larger number of references were made in parliamentary discussion in Germany even when the PISA results are improving, while the amount of references to PISA in Sweden in the early years of PISA when Swedish results were up was very low.

As shown in Chapter 6.1.1 with the presentation of the total dataset adjusted for the relative amount mentions proportional to the size of the respective country dataset, the impact of poor PISA results is similar in both countries. The spikes in PISA-mentions in parliamentary debate are of similar size relative to the total amount of mentions in Germany and Sweden. The PISA study and related recommendations occupy parliamentarians most when the performance has been below expectations. This implies an importance of PISA results for the national image, and in particular the threat poor PISA results may pose to the national image, both internally to the public and externally in the community of nation-states. As discussed as part of the theoretical framework in Chapter 3, Suchman defines legitimacy as the belief that ‘the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions’ (1995:574). The parliament as the governing body would therefore be concerned with its decisions in relation to schooling being perceived as ‘desirable’ and ‘proper’. The results of the up-coming PISA test are arguably used in the national public discourse but also internationally as a way of measuring the parliaments’ and government’s legitimacy, i.e. the extent to which they made the ‘right’ decision and put in place the ‘right’ reforms. In the context of education, reforms often only show effect after a decade or longer. In the context of the PISA studies for example, reforms in early years education implemented today will affect the two to five-year-olds that will participate in the PISA test in 10 to 13 years. In the context of world culture theory, the legitimacy of actions does not necessarily get assessed against moral standards or results of these actions. Rather legitimacy gets judged against an emerging cultural standard within world society. The data suggests that the emerging cultural standard is for parliamentarians to take PISA results seriously and react to them with reforms that might plausibly ensure better performance in the next round.

7.2.2 Lack of criticality toward PISA

One question the data poses is why members of parliament have been largely uncritical toward PISA. Chapter 6.2.1 takes a closer look at the critical voices and puts them into a temporal context and in relation to the quality of the PISA results. Nonetheless, with 90% of all quotations in the German context, and 95% of all quotations in the Swedish context, being classified as ‘supportive’ of the PISA studies as an institution, further explanation is necessary.

There is of course the possibility that a more critical discussion about the PISA objectives, set-up and methodology occurred before both Sweden and Germany decided to participate in the first PISA study in 2000. While it was beyond the scope of this thesis to study the debate before 2000, I have done a quick search for the mention of ‘PISA’ in the German and Swedish parliamentary debates. In both cases, no mentions of ‘PISA’ in its meaning of ‘Programme for International Student Assessment’, were found. In any case, according to the
data analysed for this thesis, not much of a potential criticality toward PISA prior to the 2000-study is left in the parliamentary debate from 2000 onward.

One possible explanation of the lack of criticality toward PISA can be derived from world culture theory. Taking PISA results and recommendations into account in the policy debate has become a cultural standard, especially among ‘model nation-states’ such as Sweden and Germany. PISA is seen as a legitimate and credible source of insights and advice. This cultural norm seems to have emerged and been established to the extent that critical voices that, for example, reflect on the role and influence of the OECD on national education policy only occur from the far-right. With the Alternative for Germany (AfD) only having been in the German parliament since 2018, it will be interesting to follow the parliamentary discussion of PISA over the next couple of years. How does the AfD’s criticism of PISA influence how PISA is discussed in general?

7.2.3 Using PISA as a vehicle for political gambits

A total of 268 quotations, out of 1373 analysed for this study, have been classified as using PISA to make a political gambit. This equates to approximately 19.5 percent. The share of political gambits in Germany is 21.7 percent (214 out of 986 quotations), higher than the share in the Swedish context, where 14.5 percent of all quotations (54 out of 373 total quotations) were classified as such. While the difference between Germany and Sweden has already been discussed in 7.2, the general point that PISA is being used to make political gambits needs to be considered. To the extent that this has not been touched on in the existing literature, this finding is surprising. How PISA results are used to discredit the government has certainly not been studied in any depth, apart from the work focusing on public discourse through the lens of media analysis (e.g. Grey & Morris, 2018; Hopfenbeck & Görgen, 2017), and might indeed be of little interest to the field of ICE.

The data suggests that PISA results and performance are used in both Germany and Sweden to place responsibility and blame on political opponents. The data even shows slight spikes in the general discussion of PISA in election years (see 6.2.2). This finding is interesting in two ways. Firstly, it suggests that PISA is seen as a legitimate policy tool and important reference points by all political parties (with the exception of the AfD in Germany, possibly). This strengthens the explanatory power of world culture theory, seeing PISA’s role and influence relying on the it having become a normative standard among policy makers globally. Secondly, it suggests that the governments in Sweden and Germany are being held responsible for PISA performance and that this performance is often equated with the quality of the education system. In Sweden, there has been more debate about which government should take responsibility for results from which year, also mentioning the disconnect between the current government and the time for education reforms to show effect. In which ways parliamentarians should use PISA results as stimulus for future reforms is indeed underdiscussed and under-problematised in parliament, as the lack of general criticality (7.2.2) suggests, despite the growing body of research problematising PISA’s role in education policy making (e.g. Adam, 2017; Addey, 2017; Sjöberg, 2019).

7.2.4 Impact of PISA’s country rankings on parliamentary debate

As Figures 14 and 15 in the previous chapter show, country rankings are the dominant aspect of the PISA study that gets discussed in both the German and the Swedish parliament. The details are elaborated in section 6.3. Arguably, country rankings are visually appealing and easily accessible for the media, the public as well as parliamentarians. Sjöberg (2019) argues that country rankings and other aspects of presentation of results are based on intentional decisions by the OECD and PISA. He writes: ‘the so-called PISA-shock is not “created by the media” as often claimed, but is created by the OECD itself at the PISA release
and subsequent policy-briefs and reports, often adapted to the national contexts’ (Sjøberg, 2019:46).

In the context of parliamentary debate, this has two consequences: possible misinterpretations of results as well as direction attention toward policy borrowing. Misinterpretations are rooted in the difference in points between actual ranks being of little meaning. Sjøberg highlights that ‘mean differences between e.g. rank 6 and 12 are often not statistically different’ (2019:19). The data analysed in this thesis however shows that parliamentarians are very focused on the ‘top’ performing countries and suggest these as sources for policy learning. If the difference between countries is however not statistically different, then the ranking gives a false presentation about which education systems are at the ‘top’. More precisely, the misinterpretations through a linear ranking happens as single countries are seen as top performers while all countries ranking between 6 and 12, for example, might be statistically similar, and thus equally top-performing.

As presented in section 6.3.2, country rankings also steer parliamentarians’ attention with regards to which countries policies could be borrowed from or not. The German parliamentary debate for example mentioned Sweden initially as a country to borrow from, while later discarding it as an example to follow, when PISA scores began to drop. This study has not looked at the extent to which policies have been borrowed but analysed where politicians in Sweden and Germany looked for inspiration. PISA country rankings were also referred to in order to formulate national goals and thereby implicitly steered the ambition to become a ‘policy lender’. Being among the top performing nations in the PISA study certainly seems to be desirable and boost the status of the nation in world society.

There was also a notable difference between the rhetoric around countries from a similar geo-cultural area and the PISA top-performers from East Asia. Parliamentarians were keener to suggest borrowing policy from countries that are perceived as ‘culturally closer’ to their own country. This also suggests that parliamentarians read PISA results somewhat ‘selectively’ to gain support for their reforms.

7.2.5 PISA and the debate on educational disadvantage and academic excellence

In section 6.4.1, Figures 16 and 17 show the focus points in the status quo when referring to PISA, and Figure 18 and 19 in section 6.4.2 summarise what needs for change are highlighted using PISA. Considering both data-subsets of status quo and needs for change, 9.1 percent of all PISA mentions in the Swedish parliamentary debate concern educational disadvantage, while 14.7 percent of all quotations in the German context do so. In contrast, references to PISA linked to academic abilities account for 19.8 percent of the Swedish parliamentary debate, and 13.4 percent in the German one.

What is surprising to find is the difference between both topics, and PISA indicators, in the Swedish context. In 2000, Sweden scored high in both educational equity as well as academic performance. While equity has sunk since then, academic performance improved, after a long downward trend, in 2015. Yet, the debate seems to focus more on academic scores than educational disadvantage. To what extent has PISA influenced the focus on academic abilities over equity and access to equal educational opportunities? In Germany, educational disadvantage and academic abilities are discussed to the same extent in relation to PISA. The poor results in educational equality Germany received in the PISA results published in 2001, brought the issues of educational disadvantage into the national parliamentary debate. This suggests that the debate is influenced by the parameters measured by PISA and the marks received.

The findings at hand thus suggest that the PISA studies have played a role in shaping the parliamentary debate on the important factors of success in an education system, in both Germany and Sweden. It also suggests that the PISA studies, accompanied by visualisations, country ranking etc., privileges certain parameters over others. Might it be
perceived as more important and urgent to improve academic results than to ensure equal opportunities? The data suggests that this has likely been the case in the Swedish debate.

7.2.6 PISA as ‘objective pieces of evidence’

The importance given to PISA in parliamentary debate (7.2.1), the lack of criticality with which PISA is received (7.2.2.), the way PISA is used to formulate political gambits (7.2.3), the importance given to the PISA country rankings (7.2.4) and how PISA parameters are being picked up in the parliamentary debate (7.2.5), all point to the conclusion that the PISA studies are largely seen as ‘objective pieces of evidence’. Parameters introduced by PISA are being embedded in the parliamentary debate, e.g. educational disadvantage. Importantly, however, the OECD – as elaborated in Chapter 1 – is an organisation with the mission of ensuring economic growth, based on neo-liberal values, as explained by its 50th anniversary vision statement (OECD, 2011). Yet, this is not problematised by members of parliament of any political party. Rather, PISA has become a dominant piece of research that might be given disproportional importance in comparison to other international student achievement studies. To test that hypothesis, it would be interesting to compare the current thesis findings to how other international student assessment studies, such as TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study), have been perceived and discussed in parliament over time.

Perceived as an objective piece of evidence, PISA data is used in both Sweden and Germany, at the decision of the parliament, to inform national report and national education committees. PISA results and recommendations also seem to influence allocation of research funds (Sjøberg 2019:49-50). The fact that the data at hand suggests that PISA is seen as an ‘objective’ piece of evidence and snapshot of the current situation of the education system, in both Sweden and Germany, adds to the growing body of research critically investigating the role and influence of PISA and the mechanisms and beliefs underpinning it.

7.3 Findings in relation to earlier research

The findings of this thesis complement the existing literature in constructive ways. Most importantly, it builds on Ringarp’s comparative studies of Germany and Sweden (Ringarp, 2016; Ringarp & Rothland, 2010) by analysing data from a time-period extending up to 2018. This enabled me to capture the full extent of parliamentary debate when Sweden underwent a PISA shock following the publication of PISA 2012 in December 2013. Generally, I find that the debate around PISA shifts in similar ways in both the Swedish and the German parliament relative to the respective PISA results. The PISA debate peaks in Sweden simply twelve years after the debate peaked in Germany, around the German PISA shock.

The findings of this thesis are also in line with many researchers problematising the OECD’s soft power through the influence of PISA on national educational policy debates (Adam, 2017; Bieber & Martens, 2011; Grek, 2017; Lewis & Hogan, 2019; Sellar & Lingard, 2013a; Sjøberg, 2019). This thesis contributes to the growing body of evidence showing the lack of criticality with which PISA results are discussed among policy makers. Steiner-Khamisi, (2003) looks closely at the impact of league tables on national policy debates, arguing that PISA results are often used for scandalisation or glorification of past education policy actions. The findings of this thesis that country rankings are the most dominant aspect of PISA discussed in parliament underline this point. Steiner-Khamisi (2006; Steiner-Khamisi & Stolpe, 2006) discovers that policy makers in late adopter countries such as Mongolia use references to PISA findings in order to give legitimacy to their reform suggestions when there is no majority support in parliament for the suggested reform. This thesis finds, that even parliamentarians in Sweden and Germany, often among the early adopting countries and ‘model nation states’, use
reference to PISA to increase the legitimacy of their suggestion. Linking reform suggestions to PISA as ‘an objective piece of evidence’ arguably communicates that the suggested reform itself is the ‘objectively right thing to do’.

The kinds of changes suggested, and aspects of PISA highlighted that the data shows, also provide evidence for Luhmann’s systems theory and the concept of externalisation (Schriewer, 1990) having explanatory power for the process of cultural diffusion. The data shows that the PISA study introduces economic jargon to the logic of education policy while simultaneously functioning as a vehicle for cross-national transfer. The prominence of educational disadvantage as a concept mentioned in relation to PISA suggests because it gets measured by PISA. The focus of the parliamentary debate on financial resources, as well as the general subscription to the benefit of monitoring and measurement to improve quality of schooling, are examples of concepts of neo-liberal economics entering the realm of education.

Lastly, the findings revolving around PISA being used to make political gambits are not mentioned in the existing research and literature on PISA. It might be the case that earlier data shows similar patterns, but that these have not been included or mentioned in published research due to their limited relevance in understanding processes of policy borrowing and lending. However, the findings on how PISA is used in the German context in shout-outs and to discredit individual members of parliament are intriguing. Especially from the vantage point of political sociology, these findings should be explored further.

7.4 Relevance of world society theory for education policy research

Due to the transnational nature of the OECD and it being a locus of control from which influence flows into different national realms, theories of dominance or direct power that can explain bi-national policy transfer processes fall short. Seeing the diffusion of policy concepts and behaviour as a result of cultural emergence in a complex system, world culture theory holds much explanatory power for the phenomenon of PISA in different national contexts.

In the context of this thesis, world culture theory provides a lens through which the lack of criticality with which PISA is received in both country contexts can be explained. It can also account for similar reform behaviours in Sweden and Germany when PISA results were below expectations. Building on the concept of ‘model nation states’ that other nations want to live up to, world culture theory offers useful tools in the exploration of policy borrowing and lending, especially when transfers are not directly observable, or difficult to capture in the data. This thesis has uncovered more similarities than differences in the ways in which PISA has been discussed in the German and Swedish national parliament. Given the different context, these similarities can only be explained through the concept of a world cultural norm that nation states, and national governments and parliamentarians more concretely, aspire to live up to.

7.5 Benefits and limitations of the method applied

Applying content analysis to verbatim protocols of parliamentary debates in Sweden and Germany has generally been productive in fulfilling the research aims and objectives. The aim was to qualify the influence of the OECD on school reform through PISA. Choosing parliamentary discussions in Sweden and Germany as a focal point created the framework for analysis that was within the scope of a master thesis. Doing a word-search for ‘PISA’ in all parliamentary protocols in the time span of nineteen years, from 2000 to 2018, allowed me to capture the breadth of PISA as a phenomenon in the context of parliament in its entirety. The content analysis of the relevant 335 protocols created a rich dataset that can be the
foundation for research beyond the thesis at hand. In many ways, this thesis maps how PISA is used in parliamentary debate, identifying key topics and purposes behind the mention of PISA that sign-post potential fertile ground for future analyses.

The dataset of 1373 quotations mentioning PISA was relatively large, but could be captured, categorised and analysed effectively with the method of content analysis and the coding process, described in Chapter 5.2.3. To address the research questions at a more granular level, further semantic or rhetoric analysis of the data might be productive. Nonetheless, the content analysis presented was effective in identifying patterns and trends between the two countries and over time.

Another aim of the study was to explore the complex ways in which parliamentarians are influenced by the PISA studies and to better understand what drives policy makers to draw on OECD recommendations. The coding process enabled me to show which aspects of the PISA studies parliamentarians pay particular attention to. It could also illustrate that the PISA study is received largely uncritically across political parties, providing evidence for world cultural standards being at play. Hence, the methodology was well matched to the theoretical framework.

The thesis also set out to capture instances of shifting mindsets about the education system within the countries studied. The method of content analysis facilitated tracing the paradigm shifts in parliamentary discussions, when PISA results for example were ‘shockingly’ below expectations, or when the importance of educational disadvantage as a parameter enters the German parliamentary debate. There is, of course, lots of potential to explore this aspect further as well as to investigate links between PISA and dominant assumptions about schooling as well as the values underpinning education policy making.

7.6 Summary

This chapter has discussed the implications of the parallels and contrasts between the Swedish and the German parliamentary discussion of PISA in more detail. The causes and possible ramifications of the lack of criticality toward PISA, its use for political gambits and the perceived importance of country rankings were discussed in particular. So were the findings on PISA being used as an ‘objective piece of evidence’ to lend support to a parliamentarian’s suggestion. The data also showed patterns of dominant topics that could indicate PISA’s influence as agenda setting. The chapter also placed findings in relation to earlier research and discussed the relevance of world culture theory to the discipline of ICE. Finally, the benefits and limitations of the methodology were explored. The concluding chapter will now review the thesis as a whole before considering important issues for future research as a way of looking into the future and sending the reader off.
Chapter 8: Conclusion

This thesis has explored the phenomenon of PISA within the context of parliamentary debates in Germany and Sweden between 2000 to 2018. The aim was to qualify the influence that the OECD, through PISA, has on national education policy debates. At the outset of the research, the following questions were asked: How does the reception and discussion of PISA results within the German and Swedish parliament change over time? Specifically, which patterns arise in the interpretation of PISA results among parliamentarians? And how are school reforms motivated through reference to PISA by parliamentarians?

Chapter 2 presented the existing literature on the topic of PISA and national education policy. Two bodies of work were described in more detail: one focusing on the role of the OECD from the perspective of the policy lender and one focusing on national contexts and the perspective of being a policy borrower. Of particular relevance for this thesis, the work of Gita Steiner-Khamsi on policy borrowing and lending, and Johanna Ringarp’s work comparing the influence of PISA in Germany and Sweden, were portrayed in more detail. With the focus being on the discussion of PISA rather than any policy implementation that might follow it, the conception of influence as cultural diffusion, rather than power, was chosen. Chapter 3 related the key assumptions of neo-institutionalism and the specifics of world society theory, also referred to as world culture theory, and how these operate in this thesis.

To ensure the context appropriate interpretation of the data, three aspects of Germany’s and Sweden’s background were outlined in Chapter 4: their PISA performance over time, their history of education in brief as well as their parliamentary situation. The key difference between the two countries is that education policy is steered centrally in Sweden while in Germany, the sixteen states have the mandate to govern schooling in the respective state. Chapter 5 clarified the details of the research design and how content analysis was used to identify and analyse 1373 relevant paragraphs mentioning PISA in a total of 335 verbatim protocols of the parliamentary debate in Sweden and Germany between 2000 and 2018.

The findings were presented in Chapter 6, highlighting the lack of criticality with which PISA results are received in both parliamentary contexts. Another important insight is how reference to PISA has been used in both countries to make political gambits and discredit political opponents, individually or with reference to their party as a whole. Over time, PISA is more discussed in both countries when the PISA scores fall below expectations. In their interpretation of PISA results, parliamentarians pay particular attention to the country rankings and formulate ambitions of getting among the top-ten performers as national goals. A range of different changes are proposed using reference to PISA over time. Generally, the findings show that parliamentarians proposed changes independent of the PISA results, using PISA as a form of ‘objective evidence’. This adds to the pool of evidence suggesting the trend of ‘selective reading’ as also suggested by Gita Steiner-Khamsi (Steiner-Khamsi, 2012; Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006). Chapter 7 has discussed the implications of these findings, highlighting the explanatory potential of world culture theory. I have problematised the lack of critical engagement with PISA’s research design and methodology among parliamentarians. The growing body of research on the subject could provide useful insights and stimulate discussion among policy makers. I have also argued that the method of word-search in parliamentary protocols and content analysis is particularly fruitful as a way of mapping a phenomenon such as PISA in a chosen context.

In the following sections, I explore my fascination with PISA as a phenomenon and present a case for the importance of further research into the subject, as well as the support for processes driving the maturation of analysing PISA as a field of research. By way of looking ahead, three areas of research are described that I deem particularly interesting and important.
8.1 The fascination of PISA as a phenomenon in education policy

The PISA studies were conceived and developed as an idea in the 1990s, in a historical context when Western capitalism and democracy were seen as the winning ideologies that herald the ‘end of history’ (Fukuyama, 1989). Founded in 1961, the OECD is a value-based international organisation that played an important role in the coordination of economic cooperation among member states, predominantly from the ‘West’, in the second half of the twentieth century. Its vision and mission are built on neo-liberal economic assumptions. With its focus and engagement in education since the late 1990s, the OECD frames the relationship between education and economic growth and has contributed to an emerging culture of standardisation and measurement.

The phenomenon of PISA entails more than the testing of a representative sample of 15-year olds. It also includes the marketing efforts behind the presentation of results, the relationships forged between OECD staff and national decision makers, the policy briefs released on an annual basis. PISA has become a well-developed policy arm of the OECD that operates with a clear vision and intent (Addey, 2017; Engel, 2015; Grek, 2017; Sjøberg, 2019). I am fascinated with the implications of this development. Albeit the growing body of research examining PISA from a perspective of influence and power, the consequences of the way PISA operates and is received and reacted to by national decision-makers is little understood. What does it mean, for example, for societal expectations of schooling? In which way does it influence what we mean by education and how society might ensure that every child, every person, has access to it?

In complex systems such as societies, professional groups or nation-states, small changes can have an unexpectedly big effect and vice versa. It is curious that two men, Barry McGraw and Andreas Schleicher, both with an academic background in statistics and mathematics acquired in an Australian university, have led the conception, development and delivery of the OECD’s international student assessment. The Australian discourse on statistics and measuring educational outcomes possibly has had a notable impact on the development of PISA and thereby on education policy making globally. To qualify the nature of PISA’s influence on education policy, as well as discourses about schooling, is thus not least important from a democratic perspective. A better understanding of the PISA’s research design as well as the structure of PISA as an organisation will lead to more awareness and ultimately better decisions by parliamentarians and other policy makers.

8.2 Suggestions for further research

Given the limited scope of a master thesis, this section elaborates on a range of suggestions for further investigation that the research process inspired. The data collected for this thesis is much richer than could be presented within this thesis. It can be the basis for deeper analysis of the same questions, provide answers to different research questions and might even be productive when analysed from different theoretical perspectives. There is certainly potential for further insights to be gained through the application of a different method, such as discourse analysis or rhetoric analysis. Furthermore, the current analysis of the data collected stimulates interest for new questions that require different methodological set-ups. The following three sections explore a selection of examples for further research.

8.2.1 PISA as a vehicle for political gambits

In the data collection and analysis underpinning this thesis, I found somewhat surprising patterns on PISA being referred to in the context of members of parliaments making political gambits, i.e. aiming to discredit the government, another party or another individual.
In Germany, enabled through the parliamentary tradition that allows speeches to be interrupted by listeners shouting out, these political gambits took a particular form. Individual members of parliament were accused of not passing the PISA-test, or not being able to read and thereby contributing to Germany’s below-OECD-average performance in the PISA study of 2000. It also meant that references to PISA appear out of context, for example when agricultural policies or household budgets are discussed in parliament. As possible explanations for this pattern, I wonder to what extent this is part of a group-psychological process of members of parliament dealing with poor PISA results, or what has been labelled the ‘German PISA shock’. Another possible route of explanation might lead back to Luhmann’s concept of externalisation. Perhaps, such political gambits are part of a process in which the logic of monitoring and measurement gets externalised into the realm of education, and the logic of PISA becomes normalised within the German parliament. Examining this aspect of the data deeper might give insights into the current processes of democratic governance at large.

8.2.2 Political parties and their use of PISA

As part of the coding process, information on the party-political identity of the speakers uttering mentions of PISA was collected but has not been analysed here, due to the focus of this thesis. It would be interesting to scrutinise the dataset for patterns of similarities and differences between political parties over time, within and between the two countries studied. How do members of different political parties differ in their use of PISA to motivate suggested changes? Do the changes suggested look similar for members of the same party in different countries, or are within-country cross-party similarities stronger? Answers to these questions would contribute to a better understanding of how world culture flows and shapes political strategies and ideologies in different contexts. A focus on political parties for analysis contributes to the understanding along which lines or through which actors education policies converge or diverge over time.

8.2.3 PISA and the purpose of schooling

The data encompasses some, if not many, voices that were critical of PISA. Comments in both Sweden and Germany included the idea that PISA is not measuring everything that is important for education or schooling. This beckons two questions: Firstly, how does PISA shape the world culture of education and what is perceived to be important for schooling? It would be interesting to compare the data-set at hand with general mentions of educational disadvantage or other issues highlighted in the PISA study to understand the extent to which PISA, in comparison to other international tests, functions as an agenda-setting mechanism. When it comes to schooling, is what gets measured by PISA that what becomes important in parliamentary discussion and public discourse? Is the parliamentary discussion directed toward what results show, and away from how results were created or whether the research-design is in line with national hopes and goals for education?

Finally, what do parliamentarians perceive to be the purpose of education, the ambition for schooling? Directing a series of interviews with parliamentarians in one or both countries might be a worthwhile way of building on the current data and exploring conceptions of the purpose of schooling amongst policy makers, in more depth.
References


## Appendix: Coding Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code sheet item</th>
<th>Variable name</th>
<th>Variable title</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Values/reference to appendix</th>
<th>Degree of interpretation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>date</td>
<td>Today's date</td>
<td>Date of article coding</td>
<td>dd/mm/yyyy</td>
<td>objective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>country</td>
<td>Name of country</td>
<td>Name of country in which parliamentary debate happened</td>
<td>Sweden, Germany</td>
<td>objective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>protodate</td>
<td>Date of protocol</td>
<td>Date on which the parliamentary debate recorded in the protocol occurred</td>
<td>dd/mm/yyyy</td>
<td>objective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>protoyear</td>
<td>Year of protocol</td>
<td>Year in which the parliamentary debate recorded in the protocol occurred</td>
<td>2000 - 2018</td>
<td>objective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>protomonth</td>
<td>Month of protocol</td>
<td>Month in which the parliamentary debate recorded in the protocol occurred</td>
<td>1-12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>protoid</td>
<td>Unique number of protocol</td>
<td>Unique identification number for protocol</td>
<td>Germany: EE/SSS, Sweden: PY:SSS, E= election period, S= session, PY= parliamentary year, e.g. 2014/15</td>
<td>objective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>protoep</td>
<td>Election period</td>
<td>Number of election period</td>
<td>1-12</td>
<td>objective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Protoquotetotal</td>
<td># of search words</td>
<td>number of times search word is found within article</td>
<td>1-70</td>
<td>objective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>quoteid</td>
<td>unique number for quote</td>
<td>Unique identification number for quotation</td>
<td>Germany: EE/SSS/QQ, Sweden: PY:SSS/QQ, E= election period, S= session, Q= quotation number for protocol, PY= parliamentary year, e.g. 2014/15</td>
<td>objective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>page</td>
<td>page number</td>
<td>page number the quotation is found on</td>
<td>1-50000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>quotetext</td>
<td>full text of quote</td>
<td>copy of paragraph in which the term PISA occurs at least once</td>
<td>Original quotation in Swedish or German</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>text type</td>
<td>type of speech</td>
<td>type of speech in which the term PISA gets mentioned</td>
<td>speech in discussion time, speech in writing (protocol), question to government, response to question, response to speaker, shout-out,</td>
<td>objective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>speaker</td>
<td>name of person using 'PISA'</td>
<td>name of person saying the quotation</td>
<td></td>
<td>objective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>speaker role</td>
<td>formal role of speaker</td>
<td>role the speaker has in the parliament</td>
<td>member of parliament, prime minister/chancellor,</td>
<td>objective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>party</td>
<td>political party</td>
<td>acronym describing the political party the speaker is a member of</td>
<td>Germany: CDU/CSU, SPD, FDP, Die Linke, Die Grünen, AfD Sweden: C, M, KD, S, FP, L, V, MP, SD</td>
<td>objective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>agenda</td>
<td>title of related agenda point</td>
<td>name of topic/agenda point under discussion</td>
<td></td>
<td>objective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>reception</td>
<td>reception of PISA study in quotation</td>
<td>judgement of speakers attitude to PISA in general or a specific aspect of PISA</td>
<td>Supportive, neutral, critical</td>
<td>coder's interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>reason</td>
<td>main reason for mention</td>
<td>What is the main reason PISA is mentioned?</td>
<td>(17.1) Assessing or discussing aspects of the PISA study; (17.2) Describing a perceived status quo; (17.3) Highlighting a need for change; (17.4) Making a political gambit; Other</td>
<td>coder's interpretation of speaker's intention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>aspect</td>
<td>aspect of PISA study discussed</td>
<td>Which aspects of PISA are mentioned?</td>
<td>Evaluating set-up Methodology Validity of results Generalisability of results Originality of findings Country ranking Other</td>
<td>coder's interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>status quo</td>
<td>description of what is</td>
<td>Which aspect of current reality is being described?</td>
<td>Not applicable School system Academic abilities Educational disadvantage Geographical difference Teaching quality School environment Parental role Other</td>
<td>coder's interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>change</td>
<td>change suggested</td>
<td>What is suggested to need change linked to PISA mention?</td>
<td>Resource: general Age of school entry Streaming Length of school day Resource: gifted &amp; talented students Resource: early years Curriculum content Pedagogical method Resource: educational disadvantage &amp; integration School policy process Internal measurement &amp; evaluation Teaching quality School governance Parental role Other</td>
<td>coder's interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>gambit</td>
<td>political gambit</td>
<td>Who or what is supposed to be discredited?</td>
<td>Who (person): Discredit party/representative</td>
<td>coder's interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 comments</td>
<td>interpretive comments on quotation</td>
<td>What is the essence of the quotation? What is important?</td>
<td>Comment in English</td>
<td>coder's interpretation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Particular highlights for quotations**

- Quotation gets marked orange when a speaker in the German parliament refers to Sweden's PISA performance
- Quotation gets marked orange when a speaker in the Swedish parliament refers to Germany's PISA performance