# Concealment and Advertising: Unraveling OECD's Educational Rhetoric

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## Introduction

In their 2009 article "Neoliberalism: From New Liberal Philosophy to Anti-Liberal Slogan", Boas and Gans-Morse write that "Neoliberalism has rapidly become an academic catchphrase. From only a handful of mentions in the 1980s, use of the term has exploded during the past two decades, appearing in nearly 1,000 academic articles annually between 2002 and 2005." (Boas and Gans-Morse, 2009: p. 138) Interestingly enough, when tracing the history of the term, Boas and Gans-Morse note that when the term first appeared it did not have the negative normative connotation it has nowadays:

> [T]he term neoliberalism was first coined by the Freiberg School of German economists to denote a philosophy that was explicitly moderate in comparison to classical liberalism, both in its rejection of laissez-faire policies and its emphasis on humanistic values. [...] Only once the term had migrated to Latin America, and Chilean intellectuals starting using it to refer to radical economic reforms under the Pinochet dictatorship, did neoliberalism acquire negative normative connotations and cease to be used by market proponents. (Gans-Morse, 2009: p. 139)

Therefore, at present, "no one self-identifies as a neoliberal even though scholars frequently associate others [...] with this term". (Boas and Gans-Morse, 2009: p. 140). While Boas and Gans-Morse's analysis primarily referred to political and economic fields, their claims are also apt to describe educational studies. Starting in the 1990s, in fact, a large number

of scholars began to focus on what may be loosely called the neoliberal educational agenda, highlighting, in various guises and degrees, its dangers and educational fallacies. Given the purposes of this paper, I cannot summarize the whole range of criticisms against neoliberalism in education or scrutinize the documents and publications through which the neoliberal agenda is delivered worldwide. However, in order to consistently develop my argument a kind of stipulative definition of neoliberalism has to be given. Thus far, neoliberalism has been mainly understood as:

a) A political and developmental model spanning diverse fields, including education and schooling. This model places a strong emphasis on economy as a natural force producing unpredictable changes and constant renewal.[1] Within this framework, both "individuals" and "training systems"—as the European Council states—"must adapt to change". (European Council, 2000) Education and learning are thus positioned as needing to constantly chase new developments in the market economy (Apple, 1995, 2000; Connell, 2013; Hill, 2004). In Brown's words, "we are everywhere homo oeconomicus and only homo oeconomicus." (Brown, 2015: p. 33)
b) An ideology permeating the social and educational space by which a peculiar vision of individuals, students, learning and educational institutions is delivered (Clarke, 2012; Mahiri, 2005; Masschelein and Simons, 2008, 2013; Power and Whitty, 2010). This ideology places a strong emphasis on ongoing competition at all levels of education and society while weakening a vision of education as a site for sharing, togetherness and the emergence of newness. As a caveat, one peculiar characteristic of neoliberal ideology is that it presents itself, in a sense, as the only game in town. Everything falling outside the given register of performativity, economic advantage and competition is increasingly regarded as inconsequential, if not senseless at all. Such a tautological nature of neoliberalism makes criticizing and challenging its assumptions extremely difficult for, according to Hursh and Henderson "neoliberal policies" create a severe limitation of "public discourse", and "what can be said and thought" within the

1 Emphasis on the overwhelming importance of economy is widespread within critiques of the neoliberal educational agenda. In this regard, Olssen and Peters argue that under a neoliberal regime, "education is represented as an input-output system that can be reduced to an economic production function." (Olssen and Peters, 2005: 324) Along similar lines, David Harvey highlights that neoliberalism "seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market." (Harvey, 2005: 3). For a thoughtful discussion of how and why standardization works in the neoliberal educational agenda, see Mahiri, 2005: 72–88.

political, social and educational arena. (Hursh and Henderson, 2011: p. 176)

c) A set of educational policies delivered both at a supra-national and national level that establishes what, when, how and even why one should learn. Such a control over schooling is accomplished through the allocation of substantial financial resources, which steer both the macro and the micromanagement of schooling and education (Apple, 2000; Ball, 2009; Ball and Olmedo, 2013; Biesta, 2004; Marginson, 2006).

However, it is my argument that neoliberalism doesn't only act at a political level, and by means of economic penetration. It is my contention that, when analyzing the neoliberal framework for education, we have to also analyze its linguistic level, and the widespread rhetoric that guides the representations of education and schooling we address (Alexander, 2011). Without such an analysis we run the risk to not capture the power of fascination and the pull neoliberalism exerts. Neoliberalism, in fact, also acts by means of a fascinating rhetoric and language, one in which "better jobs for better lives" (OECD, 2018a) are promised, and a "new vocabulary of performance" (Ball, 2003: p.218) reshapes teachers' and students' aims and purposes. When reading publications or documents delivered by some of the major educational agencies worldwide, we may note that a strong emphasis is placed on concepts such as "student achievement and competitiveness" (U.S Department of Education, 2018), and on "what is required to succeed" (Schleicher, 2016a) in today's complex world.

Then, it is important to note that neoliberalism's power of penetration also lies in its rhetoric and ubiquity. Neoliberal language spans from the normative frameworks through which financial resources are delivered to brochures presenting specific assessment tools; it informs both the political acts delivered by nation states and videos aimed at promoting educational equipments. We find neoliberal logic and language in a number of documents from some major educational institutions and agencies worldwide—e.g., U.S Department of Education, European Commission, Australian Department for Education and Training—as well as in private schools' advertisment.

Given these premises, in my paper I wish to unravel such a rhetorical aspect of neoliberal educational agenda, which is at the heart of the success and dissemination of educational neoliberalism. Given the diffusion and ubiquity of neoliberal rhetoric, in my paper I shall restrict my analysis to one of such examples, thus focusing my attention on one of the educational agencies involved in such a protean movement, namely, OECD.

Specifically, through close scrutiny of OECD's language, I go deep into the educational and ethical gesture underpinning OECD's rhetorical apparatus. A careful analysis of OECD's documents—including publications, documents, brochure, videos and recommendations—spanning from 2012 upto 2018, will show that the Organization, while concealing its role as one shaping educational policies worldwide, shows a remarkable prowess in communicating its ideas and mastering diverse communicative registers, such as a scientific register, on the one hand, and a language more in line with advertising style, on the other hand—thus making, as I wish to argue, a problematic mix.

The paper is framed into two sections and a conclusion: in the first section, I analyse a major feature of OECD's rhetorical strategy, namely, that of concealing its normative and performative role of steering educational policies worldwide, thus presenting its products as—just—responses to pressing needs already present in schooling and society. To be very clear, OECD creates the needs to which its products—PISA, TALIS, PIAAC—are supposed to respond. In the second section, I unravel the second feature of OECD's rhetorical strategy, namely, that of mixing two diverse logics and languages, such as a scientific logic and language, on the one hand, and a logic and language more akin to advertisement leanings, on the other. In the conclusions, I summarize and conclude my attempt.

## One Test, One Vision, One School

In this section, I analyse a major feature of OECD's rhetorical strategy, namely, that of concealing its normative and performative role of steering educational policies worldwide, thus presenting its products as simple responses to needs already expressed by schools, teachers, policy makers and society at large. To be very clear, OECD, consistently with its own goals, builds a peculiar vision of education and society, ascribing such a vision not to its own interests and aims; rather, such a vision is ascribed to a widespread and unavoidable movement involving all countries around the world, and pressing needs stemming from society independently of OECD's power of persuasion and penetration. In this way, one is pushed to feel and perceive OECD's purposes and interests as one's own, while OECD comes to be seen as—just—an agency which helps us to meet the goals we already have in mind.

To introduce my analysis, I consider the OECD publication *PISA 2012 Results: What Makes Schools Successful? Resources, Policies and Practices (OECD, 2013). In the Foreword we find the following:*

> [M]ore and more countries are looking beyond their own borders for evidence of the most successful and efficient policies and practices. Indeed, in a global economy, success is no longer measured against national standards alone, but against the best-performing and most rapidly improving education systems. Over the past decade, the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment, PISA, has become the world's premier yardstick for evaluating the quality, equity and efficiency of school systems. But the evidence base that PISA has produced goes well beyond statistical benchmarking. By identifying the characteristics of high-performing education systems PISA allows governments and educators to identify effective policies that they can then adapt to their local contexts. (OECD, 2013: p. 3)

This statement, I argue, is a significant example of OECD's rhetoric. Several assumptions are included in this passage, and the statement itself, despite its plain and reassuring language, is anything but neutral and innocent. A powerful direction situates education in a well-defined value square of money, success, evidence and competition—notice, the hallmarks of neoliberalism. Moreover: as stated above, such a well-defined square is not presented as a peculiar—and legitimate—perspective of the Organization. Rather, it is presented as a neutral, unique and unavoidable reality embracing educational systems worldwide.

The question of evidence and evidence-based education is introduced in the first statement of the passage. Here, we may note that evidence itself is not questioned: it is a given. It is a given in two ways: on the one hand, it is implicitly assumed that only evidence-based data may provide meaningful information about educational systems—hardly, in fact, in OECD's educational framework may we find trace of diverse assessment models.[2] On the other hand, it is assumed that, within the range of evidence-based tools for assessing skills and competencies, PISA is the best one. Thus, as we may note, both questionable assumptions are taken for granted without arguing further. Moreover: as stated above, the need for evidence is not a specific purpose of the Organization. Rather, it arises from "more and more countries" around the world independently of OECD.

In the second statement of the passage, OECD introduces the two guidelines through which education must be conceived of: an economics and performance-based vision of education, and a strong commitment to "success" and measurement, or, better said, to

2 For more on the relationship between evidence-based epractice and neoleberal educational agenda see Au, 2011; Biesta, 2010; Hursh, 2008; Shahjahan 2011.

a—problematic—measurement of success. We are told that, "in a global economy, success is no longer measured against national standards alone, but against the best-performing and most rapidly improving education systems". Here, again, a concealing strategy is at work. By such a strategy the reader is pushed to believe the following: a) a "global economy" is an all-encompassing concept, one that can and must ground any and every educational framework; additionally, in OECD's language and ideology the concept of "global economy" is a totalizing one, namely, it stands for the world in all of its features—I will return to this in the second section. In this way both the reduction of living to economy and of education to neoliberal dictate is silently accomplished; b) success is the driven value of such a world. With respect to this, it should be noted that not just success is a problematic educational category, for in the end one could ask success in and for what; success, additionally, is also an indeterminate concept, one that, in a sense, may be filled up with anything. Otherwise stated, OECD should specify what success means in its educational perspective; and c) despite such an indeterminateness of what success means and entails, we are pushed to believe that the factors conducive to success can be clearly measured and evaluated. In this way PISA, as the best tool for measuring educational success, becomes an indispensable product at any level of education and schooling.

OECD, then, puts in place a rhetorical mechanism in which too much is taken for granted. This leads to a situation in which PISA is neither only an international survey nor an assessment tool amongst other assessment tools. Through OECD's words, we are pushed to believe that PISA mirrors an indisputable reality: the whole argument is presented as evidence. Here, it should be noted that the term "evidence" has a twofold meaning: on the one hand, the term refers to the evidence-based paradigm as the alleged gold standard for both educational assessment and scientific research; on the other hand, evidence is understood as the—grounded—reason for believing that something is true. Then, we may see that the technical and the common meaning of the term evidence reinforce one another, thus creating a kind of loop by which the reader is pushed to believe that the affirmations being made cannot be questioned—as Angel Gurrìa, the OECD Secretary General, would say, they are a kind of "mirror" of reality (Gurrìa, 2016a). OECD's rhetorical strategy equates its own vision to the vision stemming from all countries committed to educating their girls and boys.

To close the loop, in the final sentence of the passage we encounter PISA's colonialist stance (d'Agnese, 2015, 2017). Here, in fact, we read that, "PISA allows governments and educators to identify effective policies that

they can then adapt to their local contexts." In other words, PISA identifies what must be done in educational arena worldwide, with no room for uncertainty or mistake, and local countries and schools—just—have to follow, thus adapting OECD's strategies, aims and criteria to their context. That is why OECD enhances a vision of schooling in terms of adaptation and execution—gesture that is both theoretically weak and ethically problematic.

The passage quoted, then, is a significant example of OECD's rhetorical strategy, one in which OECD presents its own vision of education as an unavoidable necessity, and its work as a response to needs firmly located in schooling, educational policies and society at large. In this way OECD hinders its performative positions, thus transforming its aims in educational necessities arising from society. In this way, OECD creates the premises, the market, if you wish, in which its own products may be sold. In this case, rhetorical strategy prepares and grounds economic penetration.

With respect to the issues raised thus far, it should be highlighted that we are not facing an occasional passage. In several places OECD and its authoritative members emphasise the power of PISA of being "a mirror" of education thus "demonstrating to all countries what is possible" (Gurrìa, 2016a). Moreover: in Gurrìa's authoritative words, "PISA tests the readiness for an active role in today's society; it tests how [. . . students] think and how they work [...]. But first of all PISA shows what achievements are possible in education." (Gurrìa, 2016b). Left apart that, technically speaking, thinking of having a mirror of something is, scientifically, a medieval epistemological stance, what is remarkable is that according to OECD's own words, we are lead to believe that the present and the future of education are envisioned through a politics based on a two hour test.

However, this is not the only example of such a strategy. To provide further evidence of OECD's stance, I shall analyze two passages from two OECD's publication: *Education Today 2013: The OECD Perspective (OECD, 2012) and PISA 2012 Results: What Students Know and Can Do* (OECD, 2014). In the former publication we read the following:

> The OECD Skills Strategy provides an integrated, cross-government strategic framework aimed to help countries understand more about how to invest in skills to help transform better skills into better jobs, economic growth and social inclusion. To this end, the first main policy lever to address is to develop relevant skills [...]. The second main lever is to activate skills supply, encouraging people to offer their skills and to retain skilled people on the labour market [...] The third lever is to put

> skills to effective use, creating a better match between people's skills and job requirements. (OECD, 2012: p. 51–53)

Here, once again, we may see that OECD's rhetorical apparatus works through two related passages: a) in the first one, OECD presents its own vision of education as a request emerging from countries around the world, rather than its own vision of education; and b) in the second passage, to close the loop, such a vision is transformed in an unavoidable necessity. We may notice such a rhetorical mechanism in the first statement of the passage quoted above: OECD's role is merely one of helping countries "[to] understand more about how to invest in skills to help transform better skills into better jobs, economic growth and social inclusion." As a corollary, I wish to add that, if at the individual level, it is reasonable to suppose that "better jobs" depend on "better skills"—although a question can be made about the fact that which jobs are better depends on one's aims and aspirations—it is difficult to understand how OECD makes such an automatic passage from economic growth to social inclusion. That economic growth automatically produces social inclusion is not a given–again, such a position seems to be consistent to neoliberal ideology (Brown, 2015; Hill, 2004).

The second rhetorical passage OECD makes, namely, that of turning its vision of education into the one and only vision possible, is accomplished in the second part of the passage. Here, we may notice that "activat[ing] skills supply, encouraging people to offer their skills and to retain skilled people on the labour market [...], creating a better match between people's skills and job requirements", are well-known neoliberal rules. Schooling, otherwise stated, does no exhaust its mandate with furnishing the "right skills". Schools also have a much broader ethical, affective, and social role. However, even when limiting schools' role to such "right skills", it should be highlighted that schools should have a role in determining which the "right skills" are, and which the method for teaching and assessing them shoud be. Otherwise, we run the risk of transforming schools in mere executors of OECD's politics. In other words, too much of what schooling is about is being left behind by OECD's picture.

OECD's rhetorical strategy becomes even more evident in a 2014 publication, *PISA 2012 Results: What Students Know and Can Do,* where the twofold hindering of its own position as a performative one, and of its own view as the only view in town, is clearly at work. Given the relevance of the issue, it is worth quoting the passage at length:

> Equipping citizens with the skills necessary to achieve their full potential, participate in an increasingly interconnected global economy, and

> ultimately convert better jobs into better lives is a central preoccupation of policy makers around the world. Results from the OECD's recent Survey of Adult Skills show that highly skilled adults are twice as likely to be employed and almost three times more likely to earn an above-median salary than poorly skilled adults. In other words, poor skills severely limit people's access to better-paying and more rewarding jobs. Highly skilled people are also more likely to volunteer, see themselves as actors rather than as objects of political processes, and are more likely to trust others. Fairness, integrity and inclusiveness in public policy thus all hinge on the skills of citizens. (OECD, 2014: p. 3)

For the sake of clarity, it will be useful schematizing my point. At least four elements are significant in OECD's reasoning: a) the exchange between OECD's and policy makers' "preoccupation"; b) the linear relationship OECD stages between "necessary skills", "better jobs" and "better lives"; c) the equivalence OECD makes between what one is expected to learn, do and be as a citizen and what one is expected to learn, do and be as a—particular kind—of worker; and, as a result of such an equivalence d) the link being made between the propensity "to trust others", the "[f]airness, integrity and inclusiveness" we may find in public policy, and the necessity to produce "[h]ighly skilled people".

The first element, that is, the exchange between OECD's and policy makers' "preoccupation", is evident in the first statement of the passage. Here we learn that "[e]quipping citizens with the skills necessary to achieve their full potential, participate in an increasingly interconnected global economy, and ultimately convert better jobs into better lives is a central preoccupation of policy makers around the world." To be very clear, I do not wish to deny that "[e]quipping citizens with the skills necessary to [...] participate in an increasingly interconnected global economy" is *one* of the preoccupations of *some* or *many* policy makers around the world, nor I wish to deny that this is an aim worth to pursue—although the question remains as to what such skills are and which the conception of an "interconnected global economy" precisely is. The problem, again, is that this is not the whole picture. To put it clearly, why does OECD speak for all policy makers? And why does OECD speak just in terms of "global economy"? Again, such a preoccupation is the output of a peculiar, neoliberal vision of education, not *the* whole picture.

Following OECD's statement, we come to the second point, namely, that of transforming "better jobs into better lives". Here, one may ask when and how the conversion of "better jobs into better lives" does occur. To be very clear: At which point, and within which system of reduction,

does the translation from life to a two-hours test occur? Here, I do not wish to be naïve: a job is a relevant part of living, and life may hardly be good when making a bad job. However, the problem with equating "better jobs" to "better lives" is that not only—as argued above—what is good depends on who you are and what you wish to achieve; moreover, a good job is part of good life, for it is common sense that one's life depends on several factors, such as love, health, social and familiar relationships and so on. In this way, OECD enhances a vision in which a "good job" is the only commitment one should have, in that happiness strictly depends on which a job one obtains. Such a gesture comes to enhance a narrow and misguided vision of life, society, relationships and education. Once again, it should be noted that the use of the term "interconnected global economy", in which the term "economy" stands for the term world, is significant of such a narrowing down of living to its economic features. In OECD's picture of education students are not required to participate in the world; rather, they are "required to [...] participate in an increasingly interconnected global economy" —an argument OECD recalls in its PISA trifold brochure (OECD, 2017). The difference is pivotal, in that being in the world and with the world, means seeing oneself and others as active part of such a world; it means exercising criticism, while listening to others' reasons and debating. It means, also, questioning the very structure of our questioning.

Then, we may note that OECD, with its taken-for-grantedness strategy, by which a particular view of society is presented as the world in all of its features, erases the very conditions for sharing and debating, conditions without which schooling makes little sense. For schooling to be inclusive, one has to provide a framework in which students may also question the very order in which they find themselves. This is not the case with PISA, in which a conception of economy comes to frame education in all of its features, thus silencing from the very beginning even the need and the desire for questioning and thinking otherwise.

The third point I wish to raise is that of levelling what one is expected to learn, do and be as a citizen and what one is expected to learn, do and be as a worker. This is clear in OECD's statement that "[h]ighly skilled people are also more likely to volunteer, see themselves as actors rather than as objects of political processes, and are more likely to trust others." Here, the following question arises: how does OECD draw the conclusion that political participation and active citizenship linearly derives from high-skills qualification? Which studies offer evidence for such a conclusion? Again, OECD draws sharp conclusions and boldly makes claims about slippery and controversial arguments, without further qualification.

The fourth point I wish to discuss is strictly connected to the one discussed above, and it is that of the link OECD makes between "[f]airness, integrity and inclusiveness in public policy" and "the skills of citizens." Here, it is difficult to see why "[f]airness, integrity and inclusiveness in public policy" should depend on "the skills of citizens". To put the point directly: what have skills to do with fairness and integrity? It is common sense that one may be both un-skilled and fair, or, alternatively, skilled and unfair. The point is even more paradoxical when we come to inclusiveness, in that one would expect that such a founding value should be enacted regardless which skills one has. Moreover, society should be more inclusive exactly towards those who are less skilled, in that it is expected that highly skilled people are either already included, or have strong means to be included.

Then, through the analysis of OECD's own words, I hope to have argued that in OECD's model students—and society as well—are conceived as a kind of container for the right skills and competencies. By rendering education subservient to learning and learning subservient to predetermined set of skills, OECD makes dealing with education a question of mere functionality, a matter of put and remove. The only possible option for education, in OECD's vision, is to follow and adapt to the existing—neoliberal—regime.

Moreover: the supposed leap OECD claims to perform from the given contents of national curriculum to skills and competencies apt to manage real-life situations, is only an ostensible one. This is true for OECD repeats the mistake of the "traditional schooling model" (OECD, 2016) OECD itself criticizes, namely, that of rendering students subservient to a framework lowered from above. We should note that both the model OECD criticizes, and OECD's own framework come to schools from above, as already settled and defined. The whole set of skills and learning outcomes which students are expected to perform comes as a package from OECD to Nation States to schools, and OECD seems to know in advance which the aims and purposes of girls and boys worldwide are. In other words, both the "traditional schooling model" and OECD conceive of schooling as just a matter of reproduction and adaptation. The only difference between them lies in what is to be reproduced—predefined contents, on the one hand, and predefined skills, on the other. The uncritical adherence to the social and economic model in force OECD pursues ends in betraying education.

It should be highlighted that such a model affects and limits both students and society. On the one hand, students are forced to meet preconceived standards and values; as a matter of fact, students are implicitly

asked to renounce enacting their own projects and subjectivities—and this is another way in which PISA exerts its colonialist stance upon educational subjects. On the other hand, society loses the possibility to be challenged and modified by students. Such a model affects even teachers: they are called to enact a preconceived framework, whether they relate to students, whether to curriculum. By such a framework what a student must achieve, what the subject matter of discipline entails, and even what effects teaching should produce, is established in advance. Of course, teachers have to project their actions in classrooms, being aware and competent about all this. They also should meet some teaching standards, those standards being the national curriculum, or indications emerging from the school in which they teach. Here, to be very clear, I am not arguing for a romantic or naïve interpretation of teachers as figures that stage unmediated relationships with students, thereby coming to a deep understanding of educational situations. Teachers, of course, must be capable and competent, but the discussion should not be limited to the kinds of 'capability' and 'knowledge' that they need and use. It is also relevant to discuss a) what such performative concepts leave behind and b) the *position* that the rationale of teaching has in such educational situations, for everything constituting the rational and procedural apparatus of teaching, including professional development, is framed by teachers' intentionality, namely, by teachers' being involved in leaving teaching situations (English, 2013; Todd, 2001).

## Learning from Schleicher's Words. Mixing Diverse Languages and Logics

Thus far, I have attempted to highlight the first feature of OECD's rhetorical strategy, namely, that of concealing its performative and normative educational role. In this section, I unravel the second feature of OECD's rhetorical strategy, namely, that of mixing two diverse logics and languages, such as a scientific logic and language, on the one hand, and a logic and language more akin to advertisement, on the other. Along the way, other features of OECD's stance will emerge, such as a problematic uniformity of language within the Organization, and a likewise problematic narrowing down of the purposes and aims of education. To make my point, I focus on four of Schleicher's videos. The reasons for my choice are grounded, on the one hand, in the authority of the person, in being Andrea Schleicher the Director of the OECD Directorate for Education and Skills; on the other hand, such videos, in being exemplary of OECD's stance and gesture, allow us to come to full circle about the vision of ethics and education OECD enacts.

The first passage is taken from a video presenting the *PISA-based Test for Schools*, a tool aimed at measuring and benchmarking schools' competitiveness and efficiency. I quote two significant passages from the video and then provide my commentary:

> For more than ten years now PISA, the world's premier students assessment, has evaluated and compared student's systems all around the world. [...]
> [PISA-based Test for Schools task is] provide tangible insights on how to leverage improvements. And that is exactly what PISA-based Test for Schools is about. They [policy makers, teachers, educators] know how important it is for their students to enter a global economy where they will be competing for the best jobs with young people from all over the world. And in a global economy the benchmark for educational success is no longer improvement by national standards alone, but the best-performing education systems internationally. (Schleicher, 2016a)

Above all, we may note a clear similarity – if not uniformity – with both Gurrìa's words and several OECD's documents (see Gurrìa 2016a, 2016b; OECD, 2014, 2016). The language being spoken, the terms used, the syntax emerging from comparison and even the 'mood' which permeates both Schleicher's, Gurrìa's and OECD's words seem to come from the same source. Of course, consistency and concord within organizations are expected. However, here a different mechanism seems at work: OECD and its authoritative members speak in unison, with one voice, so to speak. Such a stance reveals a problematic gesture toward society and education, for one would expect more nuanced and even diverse positions within such a complex and articulated organization as OECD is, especially on a matter such education that is, by definition, complex, uncertain and multifaceted. Education, in fact, is related to societies, which are, by definition, complex and variegated. The argument I raise is related to the overall politics enacted by OECD: in narrowing down education, living and society, in uniforming them to one's vision one must use a well-defined and standardized language, a language in which diversity and differences are not allowed. Then, such uniformity is but another example of the severe reduction of education enacted by OECD.

Returning to Schleicher's statements, we find a clear expression of the features education must have in OECD's framework: a) success and money as the measure for a good education; b) competition as the basic educational engine; and c) a performance-based conception of education. Such elements are clearly expressed in the last four lines:

> They [policy makers, teachers, educators] know how important it is for their students to enter a global economy where they will be competing for the best jobs with young people from all over the world. And in a global economy the benchmark for educational success is no longer improvement by national standards alone, but the best-performing education systems internationally.

Students, once again, enter a "global economy", not a global world. The difference is not a philosophical one. Rather, it has important political, ethical and pragmatic bearings. Entering a global world, in fact, is a global process, in that all of one's and others' personality are involved in such an encounter: new relationships emerge, and new encounters are being made. On the contrary, when entering "a global economy" individual features come to be subservient and reduced to the economic features of life. Living, then, comes to be reduced to competition "for the best jobs", meaning that other human beings come to be seen as your competitors—and that is why education is a performance-based system and PISA dangerously narrows down education to a zero-sum game, one in which one wins if one's opponents lose.

However, as previously argued, benchmarking educational success is the key-means by which OECD's politics is accomplished—and, in fact, "Measuring Student success around the World", as PISA homepage recites (OECD, 2016), appears the key-objective of PISA's politics.

The same concepts are expressed in another video, titled *Use data to build better schools*. I quote three significant passages and then provide my commentary:

> So this tells us that, in a global economy, it is no longer national improvement that is the benchmark for success, but the best performing education systems internationally. The trouble is that measuring how much time people spend in school or what degree they have got is not always a good way of seeing what they can actually do. Look at the toxic mix of unemployed graduates on our streets, while employers say they cannot find the people with the skills they need. And that tells you that better degrees don't automatically translate into better skills and better jobs and better lives. [...]
> High-performing systems also share clear and ambitious standards across the entire spectrum. Every student knows what matters. Every student knows what's required to be successful. [...]
> If we can help every child, every teacher, every school, every principal, every parent see what improvement is possible, that only the sky is the

limit to education improvement, we have laid the foundations for better policies and better lives. (Schleicher, 2016b)

Here, let me say that I acknowledge that, as Schleicher states, "better degrees don't automatically translate into better skills and better jobs and better lives." But I believe that the reason for this mismatching Schleicher has in mind is dramatically erroneous. It is not so much that better degrees do not automatically guarantee better skills, as if better skills could automatically lead to better jobs and, in turn, better lives—as OECD states (OECD, 2014: p.3). It is that the whole string, which should conduct from "better skills" to a "better life" is both scientifically unfounded, and ethically problematic. This is so for scientifically, the last passage—that converting better jobs into better lives—is a leap between incommensurable entities. Ethically, through such a leap a severe reduction and impoverishment of what living may be is enacted. Students, in fact, are pushed to believe that education is just a matter of acquiring the right skills' set, one that, in turn, should conduct to a fulfilling life. Schleicher, in fact, states that "[e]very student knows what matters. Every student knows what's required to be successful." I believe that this ostensibly simple statement has to be carefully scrutinized. By such a statement the equivalence between "what matters" and success is enacted. In other words, what matters in education, and living as well, is reaching success. Again, we are pushed to ask about the opportunity to use an ambiguous concept like success as the key-aim for a delicate matter such as education.

Here, let me make an additional remark about the concluding claim. When reading that "we have laid the foundations for better policies and better lives", one cannot help to think how much such a statement is vague, and, in a sense, presumptuous. Thinking that one, whether that one is an individual or an organization, has "laid the foundations for better policies and better lives", is an affirmation that is more in line with advertisement language than with scientific language—and here, I wish to recall that what is problematic is not advertisement language in itself, but the mixture of scientific authority and advertisement fascination, which OECD enacts. Specifically, we cannot help to ask what such foundations for better lives are, if such a better life is to be evaluated through a two-hour test. To be very clear: what kind of evidence does OECD have in mind for assessing such a betterment of living? Otherwise stated, when hearing that "employers say they cannot find the people with the skills they need. And that tells you that better degrees don't automatically translate into better skills", we are within what, from a scientific and political perspective, may well be argued and sustained. However, when we come to living as a

whole, things change, and we enter an undefined – and perhaps undefinable – matter.

We find a further instance of such a gesture in the webpage devoted to explain aims and structure of the PISA-based Test for Schools, we find the following:

> It is expected that the PISA-based Test for Schools will provide [...] the opportunity [...] to improve learning and build better skills for better lives." (OECD, 2018b).

Such a statement is not an isolated case. In several places OECD affirms its capacity to identify which the way for a "better life" is. In a sense, such a call for "a better life" is an OECD's brand.

We find such a gesture in a OECD's 2012 publication with the meaningful title *Better Skills, Better Jobs, Better Lives*. We find it, again, in a 2014 publication, where OECD, again, speaks about "convert[ing] better jobs into better lives" (OECD, 2014, p. 3). By combining scientific authority and advertisement fascination OECD produces a kind of mix of superficial optimism and scientific evidence that is highly ambiguous and difficult to debunk.

However, it is my contention that such a problematic approach does not derive from lack of conceptual knowledge or awareness. Rather, it is the consequence of a precise choice and communicative approach. OECD, in its claims and findings mixes two diverse logics and languages: a) a scientific logic and language, with OECD being a center for data collection and elaboration in diverse fields; and b) an advertising logic and language, through which OECD may spread its ideas in all levels of population. Such a question is not a merely linguistic or theoretical one. Analyzing OECD's language, in fact, we may note that, on the one hand, OECD strongly reclaims a scientific role while, on the other hand, in its communications through webpages, videos and brochures, OECD's language and overall gesture mirrors advertisement's language—see, for instance claims such as "convert better jobs into better lives" (OECD, 2014) or "PISA results reveal what is possible in education" (OECD, 2016: p. 2) which hardly could find space in a scientific publication.

Such a twofold gesture is highly problematic, in that, when listening to an advertisement, one is aware that languages and images are intended and prepared in order to capture listeners' attention, thus persuading people to buy the product advertised rather than the concurrent one; features and benefits of products are, then, intentionally overestimated. The question is that people are well aware about the amount of pretense contained in advertisement and, in turn, such a pretense, due to the nature

of the message and people's awareness, does not work as a deceit; rather, it is an explicit rule of the commercial game. However, this is not the case when listening to institutions claiming scientific authority –as in the case of OECD. When playing the game of research, as it were, we have to abide by quite a different rule. Here, one would expect a kind of inclusive approach, and the possibility to fairly take into account different and even opposite opinions, gestures and options – a gesture that in advertisement would be senseless and, as it were, masochistic. So, OECD, through such a twofold gesture and language, one that speaks at the very same time and with respect to the same contents through scientific publications and brochures, enacts a politic that is, in my opinion, highly ambiguous. If one would stress the question, one could say that OECD misuses its reputation as a scientific authority, thus making claims that hardly may be found in a scientific publication, but that, due to their captivating nature, aim to convince people about the goodness of its own products—PISA, in this case.

This is clearly expressed in third video I analyse, namely, *Pisa for School. What and Why?*

> PISA, the world's premier students' assessment has evaluated and compared school systems all around the world. The modern world no longer pays people for just what they know [...] but for what they do with what they know [...]. Even the best performing High School in the United States have room for emprovement in order to reach the performance level of the highest performing systems internationally [...] They [teachers and policy makers] know how important it is for their students to be prepared to enter a global economy where they will be competing for the best jobs with young people from all over the world. And in a global economy the benchmark for education success is no longer improvement by national standards alone, but the best performing education systems internationally. (Schleicher, 2018a)

A first thing to be noted is that, once again, Schleicher expresses the same questionable concepts: PISA is the "world's premier students' assessment", PISA-based Test for School is necessary for students to succeed, a "global economy" as an all-encompassing concept which comes to erase the complexity and diversity of world and societies. Once again, these questionable concepts are taken for granted without further argument or reasoning. However, this is not the only thing worth analysing in this passage. While Schleicher's discourse is focused on schooling at large, the attention is just on competing "for the best jobs". The "education success" and "the best performing education systems internationally"

are—just—committed to prepare girls and boys to strive in the market arena. Education, then, is narrowed down to supplying young people with the skills needed in order to compete for such "best jobs".

Related to this, is the fourth video I present, which is extrapolated from the *London Conference on Employer Engagement in Education and Training.* In this video we learn that

> Our role is really to develop better policies for better lives ... Developing for example the right skills for people [...] and making sure that children from early ages all over the world [. . .] may get the kind of skills they need. PISA works "to make sure children have this kind of perspective of what they could be [...] so they can look out at in all [...] successful professions. (Schleicher, 2018b)

When reading this passage, a number of questions arise: which is the concept of "better live" Schleicher has in mind? Is it possible to establish a unique set of skills needed by people in order to accomplish such a better life? Which is the model for children development Schleicher has in mind?

Once again, a totalizing logic is at work, and such a gesture is even more problematic when addressing subjects at earlier and earlier age. This is true for when people, since childhood, are conceived of as a kind of recipient for the the "right skills", education – and society as well – are no longer the space where diverse perspectives, desires, aspirations, feelings, and ideas meet and confront one another, joining, connecting, colliding, melting, and giving rise to diverse feelings, ideas, perspectives and aspirations. Education, schooling and society alike are narrowed down to a perpetual arena, where girls and boys are trained to compete since their childhood for "successful professions".

## Conclusions

In my paper, I have argued that in order to understand neoliberal educational agenda and its power of persuasion and penetration, a thorough analysis of its rhetoric and language is required. In order to accomplish this task, I have focused my attention on OECD's language and rheroric, analyzing its public documents from 2012 to 2018. I have argued that, along with a severe standardization of education and language, and the concealment of its normative and performative role, we find in OECD's educational documents a mix of diverse logics and languages, namely, scientific and advertisement language. Such a mix confers OECD an unduly advantage, namely, that of captivating people attention while reassuring them about the truthfulness, impartiality and objectivity of its own assertions. I have also argued that OECD presents a narrow vision of what

education is and should be. OECD, in a sense, accomplishes a fourfold reduction of education. OECD, in fact, narrows down education to learning, learning to assessment, assessment to a performance-based accountability measure system and performance-based accountability measure system is finally turned into PISA. OECD, in this way, ossifies the register of human actions and ways of being—a gesture, I would highlight, that is even inconsistent with OECD's commitment to innovation. To be very clear, OECD does not invite another interpretation of education than that of competition amongst countries, students, teachers, and schools. As a result, schooling comes to be seen as just a means through which boys, girls, and even children, acquire the necessary skills to strive and compete for "successful professions" (Schleicher, 2018b).

In this way, OECD fails to recognize teachers', policy makers', students', and even people's capacity to autonoumously share, discuss and set which goals to pursue, thus reducing schooling to a perpetual training activity aimed at producing one set of skills, namely, those assessed by PISA and provided by OECD's and connected agencies' educational programmes. That is why OECD's model for schooling ends in producing ethical disengagement in educationalists. Being ethically involved, in fact, entails being concerned with the aims and purposes of education. When discourse about educational ends is all risolved in advance, we are within what may well been called an authoritarian model of teaching, authoritarianism being understood as any and every way of educating in which educational goals and overall vision of schooling are pre-established in advance. For authoritarian teaching to be enacted you do not necessarily need students repeating sentences, ideas and ways of behaving over and over again. For authoritarian teaching to be enacted it is sufficient to cut the cord which binds values, aims and purposes to the concrete practice of education. OECD, despite its commitment to an education for life, tends to construe an artificial model of education, one in which the uncertainties, fissures and vagaries of living are neither considered, nor addressed. If we believe that schooling is not just a matter of accomplishing aims lowered from above, but an ethical space in which both students and society renew and rethink themselves, in which the "startling unexpectedness" (Arendt, 1998/1958: p. 177–178) characterising human condition may arise, OECD's penetration and influence on education and schooling has to be unmasked for what it is: an unduly attempt to totalize and fix the register of human experience.

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