

THF Lecture Series

HAS PISA HELPED OR HINDERED?

Reflections on the ongoing PISA debate

June 2015

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Abstract

The increasing influence of PISA on a global scale was dramatically called into question in May 2014 when a group of education researchers and educators published in *The Guardian*, a British newspaper, an open letter addressed to OECD PISA Director Andreas Schleicher. The letter identified a number of problems with PISA and called for its immediate suspension. Since then, the open letter has generated further debate about the validity of PISA in evaluating education quality. In this paper, I firstly review the debate and then draw on my recent studies to expose to critical assessment some of the assumptions underpinning the debate.

Introduction

Since its inception, but more prominently in the last few years, the triennial release of OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) data has made headlines in national media in the participating countries which now account for 71 nations in the world. Without a doubt, PISA has indeed become one of the most powerful actors in the increasingly globalised field of education policymaking. This international ascendancy of PISA is achieved despite consistent methodological criticisms raised by testing experts.

But the increasing influence of PISA on a global scale has finally been called into question in May 2014 when a group of education researchers and educators published in British newspaper *The Guardian* an open letter addressed to OECD PISA Director Andreas Schleicher, calling for its immediate suspension until a number of problems identified in the letter are addressed (Meyer et al., 2014). The open letter has generated further debate about the validity of PISA, involving some of the leading education scholars in the English-using academia (Sahlberg & Hargreaves, 2015 (Harris & Zhao, 2015)). The discussion included a refutation of the criticism by OECD (2014), which was quickly followed by a criticism by an education researcher who has been highly critical of PISA (Goldstein, 2014).

While such an attempt to raise questions about PISA is welcome, the criticism and the subsequent debate are underpinned by a set of assumptions that warrant careful assessment. In this paper, I am going to firstly review the ongoing debate, initiated by the open letter, and then expose some of those assumptions to critical assessment. In so doing, I aim to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of "PISA effect" on education policy as well as internationalising the debate itself.

"Open Letter" and the Debate

In May 2014, a dozen of education researchers and educators published an open letter (Meyer et al., 2014) to Schleicher, raising concerns about the growing negative consequences of PISA to education policies around the world. In its nutshell, the letter identifies the following five problems with PISA.

First, PISA has promoted over-reliance on standardised testing in many countries. This has resulted in narrowing curriculum to measurable outcomes at the expense of other important educational focuses such as physical, moral, civic, and artistic developments. Hence, according to the letter, PISA has "dangerously narrow(ed) our collective imagination regarding what education is and ought to be about". This bias relates to the OECD's primary interest in economic development,

rendering PISA concerned exclusively about preparing students for gainful employment. Second, PISA ranking of countries has encouraged governments to resort to short-term fixes “designed to help a country quickly climb the rankings”, while, in fact, none of these quick fixes have helped improve the condition of teaching and learning. Third, unlike UN organisations, PISA is not administered through proper democratic governance mechanisms ensuring transparency and democratic participation. Fourth, PISA has been hijacked by global for-profit companies that are now involved in the development of testing instruments. Lastly, PISA’s continuous cycle of global testing promotes more multiple-choice testing and more scripted lessons, and less autonomy for teachers; hence, eroding student’s and teachers’ wellbeing in many countries (Meyer et al., 2014; see also Goldstein, 2014).

Almost a year after the publication of the open letter, Sahlberg and Hargreaves (2015) published in *The Washington Post* a piece responding to the open letter. In this article, these US-based academics distance themselves from the open letter by calling for the improvement of PISA as opposed to terminating it. While echoing many of the concerns expressed in the open letter, Sahlberg and Hargreaves stressed that PISA has generated useful data that has informed education policy discussion in many countries, a view also stressed by OECD (2014) in its refutation of the open letter’s criticism. They argue that PISA has helped kept at bay harmful education reform movements originating in UK and USA that are characterised by “more market competition between schools, less university-based training for teachers, and more standardisation of the curriculum.” In addition, according to these authors, PISA has helped us recognise some of the hitherto under-recognised top-performing countries such as Canada and Finland; hence, facilitating alternative school-reform movements centred on teacher-professional autonomy and collaboration, and various measures to ensure a high-quality teaching workforce. As the authors put it, “what PISA shows to the United States is that its current course of education policies that rely on competition, standardisation, testing and privatisation of public education is a wrong way”. Sahlberg and Hargreaves also give credit to the fact that PISA has helped put equity issues on education policy agenda in many countries where they have been rather under-recognised.

Notably their criticism of PISA is less to do with the actual nature of testing itself but more to do with how it has been increasingly tainted by “commercial and ideological interest”, the same concern as expressed in the open letter. This refers to the increasing involvement of the multi-million dollar edu-business in the development and administration of PISA and to PISA’s celebration of Asian high-performers when in fact these countries are “generally weak on equity and backward in their approaches to special education”. For Sahlberg and Hargreaves, however, these issues are not significant enough to warrant the immediate moratorium on PISA as demanded by the open letter and thus their conclusion: PISA may be leaning but it is ultimately worth saving.

Sahlberg and Hargreaves’s positive appraisal of PISA needs to be understood in their attempt to position Canada and Finland, the two high PISA performers, at the centre of alternative global education reform movement to what Sahlberg (2011) calls elsewhere as “Global Education Reform Movement” (GERM) driven by high-stake standardised testing and market-oriented, competition-inducing measures. From their

point of view, PISA data has been fundamentally important in identifying key features of these successful education systems which now travel globally. However, little recognised in their discussion is the fact that PISA data does not explain why particular countries perform well (Goldstein, 2014). More specifically, PISA does not help us discern the effect of specific policies and programmes on the one hand, and cultural, social, and historical influences on student performance on the other. Perhaps, the very fact that their counter-reform movement has been premised upon PISA data might have made it difficult for them to entirely reject PISA, though they seem to share many of the concerns expressed in the open letter.

Soon after this rather positive reappraisal of PISA, Harris and Zhao (2015) published a refutation of Sahlberg and Hargreaves's re-appraisal. They questioned the fundamental validity and reliability of PISA data which Sahlberg and Hargreaves tend to accept. As Harris and Zhao pointed out, "many of the overly romanticised accounts of the 'top-performing' countries would carry zero weight if the PISA measure were in serious doubt". This statement responds directly to the way in which Sahlberg and Hargreaves praised Canada and Finland in their article. Furthermore, Harris and Zhao pointed out about PISA that "information about education gaps by income, gender, and area for the 'top-performing countries' are often incomplete or missing, particularly in comparison to the data set that other international organisations compile. Again, this is a direct challenge to Sahlberg and Hargreaves's positive appraisal of PISA's focus on equity issues. Overall, Harris and Zhao are unconvinced by the validity of PISA, which is underpinned by "the ideology of a culturally indifferent world of education" (Trohler, 2013, p. 158). That is, its complete disregard for the impact of historical, social, economic, and cultural context on student performance, which are, according to them, "forensically airbrushed out in favour of neatly wrapped causal attributions that can be conveniently turned into policy solutions and commercial packages" (Harris & Zhao, 2015). Hence, they see little legitimacy in Sahlberg and Hargreaves's call for the preservation of PISA.

Unspoken Assumptions

While the above debate illuminates a considerable difference in opinion among the debate participants about the value of PISA as an international assessment of education systems, they both seem to subscribe to a set of assumptions about "PISA effect". Most notable in the ongoing debate is the rather untested presumption that PISA has begun to dictate education policy around the world. The open letter for instance assumes that PISA is so powerful that it has effectively narrowed the curriculum to measurable outcomes and taken away autonomy from teachers and joy from student learning in participating countries. Here, OECD is assumed to have become "a global super-ministry of education" (Meyer, as cited in Wilby, 2014), which exercises powerful influence on education policy around the world through its production and dissemination of educational data. Assumed here is the converging effect of PISA in the form and content of pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment to such an extent that "state sovereignty over educational matters is replaced by the influence of large-scale international organisations" (Meyer & Benavot, 2013, p. 10).

Though such an alarming statement can serve certain political ends, particularly in terms of raising public awareness of PISA's encroaching influence, the

empirical evidence of the effect of PISA in various countries suggests a more complicated picture on the ground. Such studies suggest that PISA data becomes highly mediated by national and sub-national policy actors (politicians, state bureaucrats, media and education pundits, and researchers) to such an extent that ideologically contradictory reform proposals can be legitimised with identical PISA data (Pons, 2011; Rautalin & Alasuutari, 2009; Takayama, 2010; Takayama, Waldow & Sung, 2013). Hence, the actual effect of PISA cannot be assumed in a straightforward fashion; it is often heavily reinterpreted and reassembled with other data and facts to generate varying, often unpredictable policy effect, including those clearly countering policy solutions favourably highlighted by OECD. By directing their criticism solely at PISA and OECD, the open letter and Harris and Zhao, hence, tend to let national and sub-national policy actors off the hook, when in fact what policy effect PISA could have is determined largely by how its data set becomes acted upon by these policy actors.

Likewise, Shalberg and Hargreaves (2015) assumed that exemplary practices of Canada and Finland have been adopted by other countries, generating counteractive reform movements – “the Finnish Way” (Shalberg, 2011) against the aforementioned GERM. Again, uncritically accepted in their assertion is the uncomplicated process of transnational knowledge dissemination and transfer about “best practice”. They ignore how the images of “Finnish education”, for instance, become heavily contested in domestic education reform discussion to such an extent that Finnish education becomes a “project screen”; variously represented to legitimise pre-existing political agenda and ideologically driven reform discourses (Takayama, 2010, Takayama, Waldow & Sung, 2013).

But of course, to what extent policy actors in a given country can reinterpret PISA data and generate its own reform narratives is not the same around the world. Some countries, equipped with well-established research institutions, freedom of speech in media and scholarship, and extensive media networks, will have more of what Lingard and Jn Pierre (2006, p. 298) call after Pierre Bourdieu “national capital”—a country’s capacity to mobilise institutional and cultural resources to engage with external pressures for education reform—with which policy actors “domesticate” PISA. Furthermore, language is another factor to look at as OECD’s PISA-related information published in English does not directly reach countries where English is not widely used. In such countries, the reception of PISA data and reports is regulated by those in charge of translation. Often times, they are selective in terms of what is to be translated, hence limiting the flow of PISA information to the general public, media, and policy actors.

The second notable feature of the ongoing PISA debate is that it has been participated primarily by academics based in USA. In fact, though the open letter was reported as being endorsed by “scholars around the world” (Wilby, 2014), the majority of the supporters are based in handful countries, primarily in US. This has certainly constrained the parameter of the debate itself. For instance, PISA’s focus on gender and socioeconomic disparities, albeit its insufficient nature as pointed out by Harris and Zhao (2015), was much welcomed by education policy researchers in countries such as Japan and Singapore, just to name a few, where these issues had long been ignored by state policymakers. In Japan, education policy researchers

have been able to capitalise upon PISA data to pressure the Ministry of Education to take seriously widening socioeconomic disparities in educational achievement (Takayama, 2012). In Singapore, too, the PISA's emphasis on the twin focuses of equity and excellence is expected to promote more policy attention to socioeconomic disparity in education which the Singapore Ministry of Education has long refused to bring to its policy agenda.

Furthermore, in countries like Japan, Korea, and Singapore where education reform has centred on moving away from rote learning and factual recall, PISA's focus on "life skills" or ability to apply what is learned in school to real-life context has facilitated further shift away from teaching "school skills". This has been largely welcomed by education research communities in these countries where sometimes PISA has been appropriated to further promote experiential, inquiry-based, and cross-curricular learning. In these countries, furthermore, there is little evidence to suggest that PISA has singlehandedly caused the narrowing of curriculum to measurable outcomes and the introduction of standardised testing, though it could certainly be considered as one of many factors. At least the claim that PISA has "dangerously narrow(ed) our collective imagination regarding what education is and ought to be about" (Meyer et al., 2014) will be an overstatement in such countries. These facts suggest that the open letter tends to extrapolate the particular US case to "the rest of the world".

Conclusion

The argument presented here is not intended to reject many of the valid concerns around the effect of PISA raised in the course of the debate. Rather its aim is to simply suggest two issues. First, the ongoing debate has rather uncritically assumed the homogenising impact of PISA around the globe. This ignores the fact that the PISA effect is largely shaped by those who appropriate the data. Indeed, the effect of PISA materialises only when its data are enacted by national and subnational policy players. Any discussion of the possible policy effect of PISA, either desirably or otherwise, is therefore meaningless without due attention to the roles that these actors play in producing the policy implications of PISA data. This shortcoming has the unfortunate effect of diverting attention away from where it should be, how various national and subnational policy actors appropriate PISA data and what policy effect is generated as a result. Second, the debate has been dominated by scholars based in the US and this has placed unique constraints on the parameter of the debate. Perhaps in a country where standardised-testing has long been a common feature of public schooling like Japan, Korea, and Singapore, PISA could facilitate positive changes as discussed earlier. Hence, more insights must be drawn from a wider range of countries in order to carefully assess the impact of PISA on education policymaking.

Note

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