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PISA – soft governing with hard-core impact?

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Abstract:
This paper presents work in progress on a doctoral project entitled “A cross-national, comparative study of cultural factors underpinning 15 year old students’ performance in reading literacy in Australia, Finland, Sweden and Indonesia”. The study is based on the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) surveys, but aims to go beyond the PISA league tables to provide an in-depth comparison of what literacy means to students and teachers in different national contexts. The focus of this paper is “PISA impact” and the implications of a universal literacy concept.

In a globalised world education has taken on an instrumental dimension. When low performance is detected nationally, schools are typically held accountable. In international comparisons, national education systems are scrutinised and governance occurs through comparison. Of major importance then is the question of who constructs the tests and who sets the standards.

Since the initiation of PISA in 2000 the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has become a major authority on the quality of educational systems. Students are assessed not against national school curricula but against “how well young adults, at age 15 and therefore approaching the end of compulsory schooling, are prepared to meet the challenges of today’s knowledge societies” (OECD, 2001, p. 14).

Thus teachers teach to a national curriculum, but students are assessed, and compared to others on international criteria. Since PISA surveys are taken seriously by participating countries, disappointing results typically lead to calls for action and OECD policy recommendations are implemented at national level.

National steering documents still define a range of educational goals such as the students’ personal, physical, mental, social, and creative development, but this may as well be regarded as politically correct rhetoric if classroom practices are predominantly concerned with academic performance to better meet testing requirements.

In this context, this paper interrogates the possibility of ‘global literacy’ and the establishment of a broad socio-cultural reading literacy concept against which all students are uniformly measured. It asks whether a 15 year old student in rural Kalimantan has the same literacy needs as a 15 year old in New York City, and argues that what PISA represents is a soft governing with hard-core impact.

Key words: PISA, efficiency, accountability, homogenisation, education, global literacy concept

Introduction

This paper is based on doctoral work in progress titled “A cross-national, comparative study of cultural factors underpinning 15 year old students’ performance in reading literacy in Australia, Sweden, Finland and Indonesia”.

It discusses the impact of the Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA) on educational policies and systems worldwide and ensuing possible implications. It is argued that increased standardised testing, at a national and international level, impacts on educational
policies and strategies at both macro and micro levels. The emerging globalised educational prototype is contrasted with the Finnish educational culture, which exhibits characteristics of a different nature altogether. Finally the paper interrogates the possibility of ‘global literacy’ and the establishment of a broad socio-cultural reading literacy concept against which all students are uniformly measured. It asks whether a 15 year old student in rural Kalimantan has the same literacy needs as a 15 year old in New York City, and argues that what PISA represents is soft governing with hard-core impact.

Globalisation is as ubiquitous a notion in present society as it is a contested one. There is ongoing debate as to its origins and consequences, and whether its impact is of a positive, negative or indifferent nature. However, generally speaking, it has become accepted as a very real phenomenon affecting economic, political and cultural institutions as well as people’s identity, expectations and aspirations. In the public debate it is often depicted as a natural and inevitable progression of societal development; TINA, ‘There Is No Alternative’ has become the established consensus (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Sidhu & Matthews, 2005). The impact of globalisation on education can be seen as a paradigm shift away from previous democratic models which stressed equity and equality towards an education model of social efficiency. Efficiency has come to characterise this new epistemology, teamed with the key words decentralisation and privatisation, choice and accountability, performance, testing and assessment (Carnoy & Rhoten, 2002; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Efficiency is evaluated by performance related to cost efficiency. Performance in turn is assessed by testing students against various sets of goals. This focus on performance and achievement outcomes has led to the emergence of a virtual testing culture, both on a national and an international scale. It has been termed “policy as numbers”, and has resulted in students as well as schools and education systems being compared and ranked in league tables, publicly discussed and published in the mass media; “famed and shamed”. Quantification now defines progress in education. If a variable cannot be measured, no progress can be evidenced. Education has thus taken on an instrumental dimension. Low performance is detected nationally and schools - as in principals and teachers - are typically held accountable. In international comparisons, national education systems and policies are scrutinised and governance occurs through comparison. Of major importance then is the question of who constructs the tests and sets the standards (Carnoy & Rhoten, 2002; Dall, 2010; Moutsios, 2010; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010).

Since the initiation of PISA in 2000 the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has become a major authority on the quality of educational systems. PISA is based on the premise that national economic growth is dependent on the quality of human capital in the ‘knowledge economy’ (OECD, 2001). The surveys are conducted every three years with an alternating focus on reading literacy, mathematics and scientific literacy. Reading literacy was at the centre of the first PISA study in 2000, and again in the most recent one in 2009 (OECD, 2002). Reading literacy is commonly considered of utmost importance in today’s knowledge society. Reading literacy is said to underpin achievement in many other disciplines and is thus a key factor in educational attainment and life success in ‘knowledge economy’ countries. It is considered a key element in individuals’ private and public life, in education and work, in lifelong learning and life fulfilment and for active and informed citizenship in modern information societies (Alloway, Freebody, Gilbert, & Muspratt, 2002; Linnakylä, Välijärvi, & Arffman, 2007; OECD, 2001; Suryadarma, 2008).

The results of PISA 2000 showed that Finnish students were performing outstandingly well overall, with particular excellence in reading literacy (OECD, 2002). PISA 2003 and 2006 not only confirmed, but strengthened the standing of Finland as an overall top performing country (OECD, 2003b, 2007). Finland is a small country, spending less on education than others in the PISA survey, but nevertheless achieving better educational outcomes than most other countries surveyed (OECD, 2002). The Finnish success has led educators all over the world to ponder what the underpinning factors of success might be.
To understand PISA it is not only important to understand the global context in which it has developed but also how it contributes to, and potentially reshapes, global culture. It is also important to understand what this means in practice for particular national locations. To this end Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory enables consideration of phenomena on a wide scale and at many levels and requires an equally flexible and wide ranging theoretical model. The intricate inter-relationship between all the factors of education at the many various layers that impact on a student’s development is easily and clearly illustrated in Bronfenbrenner’s approach. It is often described as systems nested within each other, like a Russian doll. The innermost layer is the *microsystem* of face-to-face, direct contact interrelations, e.g. student – parent, student – teacher. The *mesosystem* refers to links between two or more microsystems, i.e. interactions between settings in which the student participate, e.g. the student’s family and his school, whereas the *exosystem* refers to the influence on the student by activities in systems where he does not actively, personally take part and which he has no control over, e.g. decisions by the school board or at his parents’ work place. The *macrosystem* is what is generally called culture, a consistent pattern in similarities and differences in the micro-, meso- and exosystems. Finally, the *chronosystem* refers to the ecological transitions that occur over a person’s lifetime, e.g. changes in roles – graduating, becoming a mother, emigrating – and socio-historical conditions, the times we are born into (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Hofstede’s cultural dimensions theory offers an additional and valuable dimension to Bronfenbrenner’s theory. Like Bronfenbrenner, Hofstede depicts culture as multilayered, manifesting at various levels of depth. He developed a four-dimensional model for comparing cultural differences between countries. These dimensions are:

- **Power Distance** – the degree of equality or inequality between people in a group or society, defined from below, i.e. as to what degree less powerful members accept that power is distributed unequally;
- **Individualism vs. collectivism** – is the society centred around the individual, ‘look out for number one’ or is the focus on the ‘we’, the collective wellbeing of, e.g. an extended family, cultural group or all of society;
- **Masculinity vs. femininity** – is the culture favouring traditionally masculine values such as competitiveness, toughness, material success or traditionally feminine ones such as caring, cooperation and life quality?; and
- **Uncertainty avoidance** – can novel, unknown, surprising, unusual situations be easily handled or do they need to be minimised by an abundance of rules and regulations? (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005).

**PISA in context:**

The *knowledge economy* and PISA:

While the Keynesian / Fordist welfare state was based on mass production of goods; knowhow, services and ideas are central to the current market model, the ‘knowledge economy’. States continuously aim for an increased share of the global market and workers also have to be able to be competitive to sell their skills in a global arena (Ball, 1998; Cheung & Chan, 2009; Little & Green, 2009). A country’s long-term economic growth and prosperity thus depends on how well the education system is aligned with market demands; how well it is preparing citizens for future study and work in a globalised economy. Youth is trained to meet society’s (the economy’s) need which in turn makes it possible for them to survive in that particular society (Bempechat, Jimenez, & Boulay, 2002; Kirsch, et al., 2002; OECD, 2002; Takayama, 2008). Competitiveness in the global economy has led to competition in the educational area, since one is assumed to be based on the other. Education has become a
commodity and is at present more closely tied to the economic system than ever before (Reynolds, Stringfield, Teddie, & Creemers, 2002).

PISA aims to measure how well 15 year old students are prepared to deal with the ‘real life’ challenges of this global knowledge society. This particular age group was chosen since in most countries 15 year olds used to be still at school but coming towards the end of compulsory schooling. Nowadays though, a majority of students in many countries remain in school for another 1 – 3 years. Further, PISA argues that to ensure fair comparability of results, the student samples have been selected according to age rather than grade. However, at 15 years of age, students have attended school for a varying number of years; while two thirds of the students in the United Kingdom are found in year 11, in Japan 100 percent are attending year 10 and in Poland 96 percent are found in grade 9. Clearly the number of years of schooling must have an impact on proficiency (OECD, 2001; Wagemaker, 2008). The PISA project was initiated by the OECD member countries as a means to obtain data about the effectiveness of education systems; to provide stakeholders (students, parents, the public and policy-makers) with evidence of educational success factors; and to provide an international perspective against which to evaluate national results. Thus, it is argued, the most valuable information is not found in the PISA league tables, even if they attract most of the general interest, but in what further in-depth analysis of data can reveal to support changes in education policies. Thus PISA results have shown, for example, that in some countries quality education and equity exist concurrently; there is very little difference between schools, socio-economic background factors can be moderated and gender gaps can be minimised – all features of successful education systems to be emulated by others. The cyclic nature of PISA will also offer the opportunity of monitoring results over time and hence observe effects of implemented changes in education policies. As all the rich data bases are freely available, PISA provides ample opportunities also for independent further research (see e.g. Kirsch, et al., 2002; McGaw, 2008; OECD, 2002).

**PISA and ‘knowledge and skills for real life’:**

The general acceptance of the human capital theory has led to a changed view of education and what it means to be educated and to learn. While previously having been a positive in itself, educational value is today measured by what competencies can benefit the individual and the society in the global competition. A different kind of person is sought to be schooled, a person skilled in communication (mother tongue), maths, science, problem solving, a person who is also information literate, globally minded, multi lingual, inter culturally versed, mobile, adaptable, level headed in crisis, flexible, creative with proper work attitudes, interpersonal skills and a life long learner (Ball, 1998; Cheung & Chan, 2009; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Spring, 2008). PISA measures the initial criteria; performance in reading, mathematical and scientific literacy (in 2003 problem solving was also included), with a view to encourage life long learning. The subsequent qualities mentioned, such as ‘adaptable’, ‘globally minded’ etc, are clearly concepts more difficult to measure on a standardised test and fall outside the PISA domain. PISA has thus in the process narrowed the scope of skills that are seen to be needed in the knowledge economy to mainly cognitive proficiencies of a utilitarian and pragmatic nature (Grek, 2009). In the steering documents for educational policies studied in the present project, there is a strong emphasis found on students’ personal, physical, mental and social development, academic achievement being one of many goals, but this may well be regarded as politically correct rhetoric if classroom practices are predominantly concerned with academic performance, to better meet testing requirements. In fact, the massive interest payed to the PISA publications while studies such as the international civics survey go unnoticed and is virtually generally unknown, supports this misgiving (“Citizenship and education in twenty-eight countries: civic knowledge and engagement at age fourteen” conducted by the International
Association for Evaluation of Educational Achievement, IEA) (Dall, 2010; Grek, 2009; J. Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schulz, 2001).

Another concern is that teachers teach to a national curriculum, but the students are assessed, and compared to others, on international criteria. Wagemaker (2008) suggests that by keeping in focus the linkage between the intended curriculum, the implemented curriculum (what is happening in the class room situation) and the achieved curriculum (student performance in relation to defined goals and desired outcomes), a valid assessment of effective education systems is attained. In contrast, PISA, whose primary aim actually is to evaluate education system efficiency, states that this is a method appropriate for national, internal systems evaluation but it does not reveal how well students are prepared for life after school. The PISA surveys, it is maintained, are informed by national curricula, but not constrained by them as PISA is not evaluating curricular knowledge obtained but rather students' ability to apply what they have learnt, in situations they will be likely to face in their future lives. Thus, it is claimed, PISA constitutes a new, dynamic model reflecting students' need for lifelong learning in order to adapt and adjust to the real life challenges of an ever changing world (McGaw, 2008; OECD, 2001). There is certainly support for the argument that national curricula may include out-dated, less useful information for historical or political reasons (Stobart, 2005). However, national curricula are generally designed in accordance with national education policies, reflecting values in a particular culture (Wagemaker, 2008). The PISA performance indicators are established at a supranational level, expressing perceived needs in a globalised society. Since PISA surveys are taken seriously by participating countries, disappointing results typically lead to calls for action and OECD policy recommendations are implemented at national level, which could be interpreted as soft governing resulting in hard-core impact expressed as homogenisation of education in progress across the globe (Grek, 2009; Moutsios, 2010).

The PISA testing culture vs. the Finnish culture of trust.

Standardised testing has spread across the world, both at national and international levels (Kellaghan, 2001). However, there are no evidence showing that frequent testing leads to improved student performance; but rather augmented student drop-out, declined teacher retention, decreased student motivation and increased cheating on tests, by students as well as teachers, illustrated as recently as in the National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) tests in Australia 2010 (ABC Online, 2010a, 2010b; Mitchell, Gerwin, Schuberth, Mancini, & Hofrichter, 2009; Sahlberg, 2007). Other concerns are, for example, curricula being modified and narrowed, teachers ‘teaching to the test’ excluding more challenging or worthwhile content, limiting the number of pedagogical strategies such as multi-modal and critical teaching, with the aim of improving student ranking (Mills, 2008). It has also been argued that test results may show what students have gained at a superficial level, but not necessarily learned at an abstract level. However, performance at the highest level of the PISA tests does show sophisticated understanding. Finally it is claimed that tests do not automatically show the efficacy of the educational system – high achievement outcomes can be a result of activities outside of school such as private tutoring (Sahlberg, 2007).

Paradoxically, the PISA top performing Finns embrace an education culture devoid of standardised, national testing and based on a ‘culture of trust’. The Finnish teachers are rigorously selected and highly qualified; they are all required to hold a Masters degree, which means that a primary school teacher typically has undertaken university studies for a minimum of five years and subject teachers six to seven years. Thus the Finns are confident that the highly proficient teachers, in cooperation with principals, parents and the local community, are able to educate their children in an optimal way, which incorporates teachers being trusted to autonomously evaluate and assess learning without any national, standardised tests; students are assessed in relation to their individual progress. The Finnish education culture is built
around qualities such as equity and equality and takes an inclusive and holistic perspective. Thus education goals have not been reduced to utilitarian, quantifiable knowledge and skills, but equally honour creativity and personal development. The broad spectrum of goals stated in steering documents seem to be implemented in the classroom. Believers in the testing culture may view this ‘intelligent accountability’ as lacking in transparency, but the Finns believe this system generates not only higher performance, but also broader and more genuine learning outcomes; a belief that clearly has been validated by the all the PISA surveys (Aho, Pitkänen, & Sahlberg, 2006; OECD, 2001, 2003a, 2007; Sahlberg, 2007; Väliljärvi, Linnakylä, Kupari, Reinkainen, & Arffman, 2002; Väliljärvi, Nummenmaa, & Sojakka, 2007). Data from the present doctoral project also confirm that these principles are indeed embraced by the Finnish people who, to a much larger degree than others in the study, trust that democratic and social skills are as important as academic subject knowledge and skill (Dall, 2010).

Transposing the Finnish education culture into Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) model, (rf. p. 4) shows an alignment of all systems. Finnish education policies are grown from consensus; all stakeholders – politicians from different camps, the public, educators, parents, and students – agree on goals and means. Therefore there is also consistency in implementation, permitting adherence to a long-term vision. Macro-, exo-, meso- and micro systems are thus in organic and ecological harmony. These three Cs; consensus, consistency and culture of trust are often seen as dominant factors underpinning the Finnish success saga (Aho, et al., 2006; Laukkanen, 2008; Sahlberg, 2007).

In Hofstede’s (2005) terms, Finland exhibits a feminine culture, with a very low power distance and moderate individualism, which indicates cultural values such as equality, cooperation, social skills, modesty, overlapping gender roles and quality of life. The score on uncertainty avoidance is at an average level, but higher than the other countries in the present study (Australia, Indonesia and Sweden), which could propose a tendency towards more structured learning situations with more precise goals. This picture supports the analysis above of Finnish education culture.

**PISA and global literacy:**

Earlier was discussed the great importance attributed to reading literacy in today’s society. It is a concept though that can be defined in various ways, and PISA has chosen a broad, socio-cultural viewpoint, where reading literacy is seen “as the ability to use, understand and reflect on written texts in order to achieve one’s goals, to develop one’s knowledge and potential, and to participate effectively in society. This definition goes beyond the notion that reading literacy means decoding written material and literal comprehension” (OECD, 2001, p. 21). This constructivist position sees the reader as an active participant interacting with the text to create meaning, shaped by his purpose for reading and by where he is situated in a historical, social, political, economical and cultural context (Green, Hodgens, & Luke, 1997; Sulkunen, 2007). The socio-cultural approach to literacy depicts a dynamic interaction between society and literacy, each mutually shaping the other; literacy practices can empower people, by giving them agency they previously did not have (Ntiri, 2009; Sulkunen, 2007). PISA has gone to great lengths to ensure that test questions are valid and relevant across countries, languages and cultures, translation processes are rigorous and all tasks included in the final test have been approved by participating countries (McGaw, 2008; OECD, 2001). However, Nardi (2008) observes there is actually no exploration of the meaning of the concept ‘culture’ in PISA, which makes a scholarly discussion difficult. Hofstede (2005) for example, sees culture as a mental program for patterns of thinking, feeling and acting which is learned and specific to a particular group of people, expressed as symbols, heroes, rituals and values. Education is a cultural process and as such embedded in, and a reflection of, a particular culture as culture permeates all social activity. No educational system can, nor aspires to be culturally neutral –
quite the opposite as it is through education that cultural values and beliefs are transmitted in
the socialisation process of children (e.g. Hoffman, 1999; Masemann, 1976; Purves, 1987;
effectiveness cannot and should not be discussed without taking the cultural context into
consideration. She suggests that student achievement is greatly informed by national cultural
values and that a framework of cultural understanding is essential to increased validity of cross-
national educational research.

Conversely, PISA claims to provide evaluations of competencies significant to adult life,
that are relevant and valid across countries and cultures, thus inferring that there is a neutral,
global literacy concept (OECD, 2001). Consequently, a 15 year old boy in rural Kalimantan, who
can only attend school sporadically because he is needed for work at home where he has no
access to written material is assessed as having the same reading literacy needs as the 15 year
old attending a posh private school in Australia, or New York City, with an extensive selection of
books at home and all modern technology at his fingertips? Similarly, how would a test example
such as discussing graffiti (OECD, 2001, p. 38) make sense to a 15 year old girl in Singapore
where graffiti is seen as vandalism and punishable by up to three years in jail or eight strokes of
the cane (Kolesnikov-Jessop, 2010)?

Conclusion:

The PISA survey results have been met with surprise in some countries and with shock
in others, but the legitimacy is not questioned. PISA has become a brand name and OECD an
authority on effective and efficient education systems, with the clearly expressed aim of
preparing students for real life challenges in the knowledge economy with the expectancy of
adjustment to constantly changing conditions. PISA policy recommendations to improve student
performance are typically implemented and, it is argued, typically leading to more utilitarian and
pragmatic education goals. Finland can be seen to illustrate an exception, an alternative
education culture, where students achieve high academic learning outcomes without the
sacrifice of other social and cultural goals. PISA asserts that results are valid and relevant
across countries and cultures without situating, or defining, the reading literacy concept in any
cultural or social context. Practical examples refute this idea, at least at the present stage. But
as PISA success may be a factor encouraging international investment and capital education
policies are amended accordingly.

In summary it is argued that through the ever increasing number of countries
participating in PISA, the uncritical acceptance of PISA results and the ready willingness to
comply with policy recommendations PISA is effectuating soft governing with hard-core impact
on education policies worldwide. This may well lead to an acceptance of a global literacy notion,
measured by a one-size-fit-all yardstick despite an obvious misfit with other cultural contexts.
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