

Book review by Mike Newman in Education Politics (SEA journal)

PISA, Power and Policy The emergence of global educational governance

Editors: Heinz-Dieter Meyer & Aaron Benavot,
Oxford Studies in Comparative Education 2013
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PISA stands for Programme for International Student Assessment. PISA is sponsored by the OECD and produces test results in reading, mathematics and scientific literacy, at age 15, for sixty one participating countries. This book is a collection of papers by twenty three academics from universities in the US, Australia and Europe, especially Finland.

It should be required reading for journalists and politicians, liable to attacks of “PISA shock”ⁱ, a condition caused by finding that one’s own country is only mid league.

The most important contention in the book is that the role of PISA is turning the OECD into the “arbiter ... diagnostician, judge and policy advisor to the world’s school systems”ⁱⁱ. The danger is that “PISA best practice will drive attention away from more relevant local policy alternatives (while) officials, politicians, parents and communities enact ... their favourite reform ... believing that it is a magic bullet”. “Schooling is highly open to fads and fashions of the moment.”ⁱⁱⁱ There are in any case two pathways to PISA success. One is the “agrarian egalitarianism” of Finland^{iv} and the other is the “school disciplinary climate” of the East Asian tigers.^v You pay your money and you take your choice.

The authors deny the universal relevance of PISA results as indicators of school success. The 61 countries involved differ widely in culture, deprivation, equality and colonial history. It is far from clear that any test can apply across the board. There are differences in the sample. In the UK, special schools are not included and the sample is 61% whereas in Germany they are and the sample is 95%. The UK sample is not extensive enough to allow valid comparisons between England and Wales, although this does not stop journalists from doing so.

There are further differences between different tests. The Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) uses 25% of algebra and 33% multiple choice questions. For PISA the figures are 11% and 66%. The two tests produce different rankings. With TIMSS, Finland is no longer top of the class, but is well beaten by Flanders.^{vi}

In a powerful paper^{vii} Meyer & Schiller explore the socio-economic and cultural variables that impact strongly on PISA outcomes. They conclude that global PISA ranking provides “very little information about the quality of ... schools”. “GDP and per pupil spending accounted for two thirds of the variation in mean PISA scores across countries”.^{viii}

Finally, the papers deal with the Finnish miracle. The authors state that global quality assurance and evaluation (QAE) promoted by the OECD and copied slavishly in the

UK (and it is feared in Wales) is not used at all in Finland, the highest scoring of the European liberal nations.

Finland shows that it is “possible to combine quality and equity at a reasonable financial cost – without school inspection, standardised curriculum and high stakes student assessment, test-based accountability or a race to the top mentality”.^{ix} “The purpose of QAE is to develop – not to control, sanction or allocate resources.”^x “There is no basis or need to publish school-based ranking lists.”^{xi}

Finally two Finish authors^{xii} describe teacher training in Finland. It is university based and research orientated. As a result the status of teachers is high and likewise the quality of teaching. Yet another example of the aphorism – if you want to know what good education is, look at what Gove does – and then do the exact opposite.

ⁱ Alexander W Wiseman, Lehigh University USA p306

ⁱⁱ Heinz-Dieter Meyer & Aaron Benavot, State University NY p9

ⁱⁱⁱ David Hunt Kamens, Northern Illinois University p137

^{iv} Janne Varjo, Hanne Simola & Risto Rinne, University of Helsinki p 68

^v Xin Ma, Cindy Jong & Jing Yuan, University of Kentucky p225.

^{vi} Paul Andrew, University of Stockholm p99

^{vii} Heinz-Dieter Meyer & Kathryn Schiller p207

^{viii} Heinz-Dieter Meyer & Kathryn Schiller p211

^{ix} Janne Varjo, Hanne Simola & Risto Rinne p 53

^x Ibid p59

^{xi} Ibid p59

^{xii} Tiina Silander & Jouni Välijärvi, Universities of Jyväskylä and Oulu, Finland p77

Comparing like with like

How should we interpret Peru’s score of 370 compared with Germany’s of 487 or Finland’s of 536, knowing that a third of Peru’s children are engaged in child labour ... only a quarter of Peruvian households have internet access ... that only 70% of Peru’s secondary aged children attend school and that Peru’s child mortality is four times that of top performing countries?

Heinz-Dieter Meyer & Kathryn Schiller p211