

**PISA, power and policy: the emergence of global educational governance**, by Heinz-Dieter Meyer and Aaron Benavot, Oxford, Symposium Books, 2013, 336 pp., \$56.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-873927-96-0

This book is a collection of papers drawn from a conference held at the University at Albany, State University of New York in December of 2011. The aim of the conference was to critically examine how and why certain jurisdictions succeed within the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and to explore the extent and nature of the influence that arises from the benchmarking of performance within school systems arising from PISA rankings. For anyone wishing to brief themselves on one of the key aspects of contemporary global policy in education, this book is very well worth reading cover-to-cover. In particular, the historical chapter written by Daniel Trohler (Ch. 6., 141–160) on the cold-war origins of the OECDs involvement with educational assessment and the development of PISA, reminds us that all major institutional structures are generated in specific social and historical contexts.

The volume forms part of the Oxford Studies in Comparative Education edited by David Phillips and is edited by Heinz-Dieter Mayer (Cornell University) and Aaron Benavot (Stanford University). Both have academic and consultancy experience in the fields of educational policy and administration. Meyer is best known for his work on Institutional theory through which he aims to historicise the networks generated within and around major educational institutions in order to understand their impact more broadly.

A key thread running through all 13 papers is that the OECD/PISA framework has become the centre-piece of an emerging global governance that effectively challenges nation-state centred goals and policies in education. As such the collection deserves a wide readership because, if true, such a claim strikes at what traditionally has been the core ideological purposes of most nationally framed and funded state education systems. Another key feature of this collection of papers is the five papers emanating from Finnish scholars whose special locus within this issue arises from the fact that Finland has consistently over the past years scored highest within the PISA rankings. It may be worth reading these five papers as a unit in order to gain a sense of the difference between the Finnish system and that which obtains in most other 'developed' nation states.

The papers examine a number of paradoxes concerning the PISA process which have become widely recorded and debated. One such paradox lies in the way that the Finnish education system appears as one of the least to conform to the OECD educational reform package which stresses accountability driven systems working towards standardised test based models. Arising from this Meyer and Benavot wryly observe that the sheer volume of overseas visitors to Finnish schools has led to the authorities imposing a visitor fees to add a welcome supplement to school incomes. Several papers point out that simplistic cross-national comparisons just do not produce much of value, leading to the inevitable conclusion that non-schooling factors must play a decisive role in producing the Finnish success rates. Having raised such a possibility for Finland, several authors ask whether it follows that elsewhere, in jurisdictions such as Singapore, Holland, Shanghai sub-region and South Korea, all of which score highly within the PISA ranking, that non-schooling factors are the major determinants of high performance within the PISA framework.

Shifting to political concerns several authors examine the way in which many governments seemingly have rushed to embrace the OECD/PISA framework, despite the way that it negates state-national policy priorities through education. The authors ask why there is

such a political adherence to a framework that in effect, disempowers local policy priorities? The papers by David Kamens, Daniel Trohler, Marlaine Lockheed, Sam Sellar and Bob Lingard raise questions concerning the rise to dominance of a form of global corporate governance that exerts a stronger influence upon state governments' policy-making than ever before. A particular concern is the way in which many developing economies have fallen prey to a neo-imperialism of the global corporate interests which the OECD represents.

Another paradox is that in different jurisdictions similar PISA outcomes can stimulate varying policy responses. For example, in one jurisdiction the response is to widen the involvement of for-profit providers of schooling. Yet, elsewhere the response is to strengthen the central direction from the state.

A further paradox lies in the way the PISA framework has become so pervasive despite it evidently not measuring many contributory factors that are widely recognised as being crucial to educational outcomes and student performances. One example of this, drawn from the papers by Tiina Silander and Jouni Valijarvi and by Paul Andrews, is the way that the teaching profession within Finland has traditionally held very high status with high degrees of professional independence. It therefore has a tradition of attracting the highest performing undergraduates. This ideological view of teaching and teaching permeates the national culture and significantly influences the attitudes towards learning and education among parents and students.

Although the collection focuses mainly upon school assessment, there is concern at the widening of the OECD assessment frameworks and ideology into Higher Education and national workforce performance evaluations. The authors collectively strike a warning note about the dominance of the OECD upon educational thinking and practice. They express concern at the way in which the framework serves to create abstract hierarchies between states thus perpetuating negative perceptions about certain jurisdictions. Meyer and Kathryn Schiller cite the example of the way that a country such as South Korea is assessed using same measures as a country like Peru despite widely differing conditions and circumstances.

Another concern raised in several papers focuses upon the underlying behavioural patterns and traits that are being positively encouraged through the PISA assessment framework. Success in test-based activities often values docility, obedience, conformity and standardisation rather than individuality, creativity, questioning and variety, thus producing yet another paradox of promoting behavioural and attitudinal patterns that are the opposite of those perceived to promote entrepreneurialism.

As a postscript to the debate, it may be worth considering the view of Pasi Sahlberg, Director of the Centre for International Mobility in Finland who argues that PISA results show that the strongest performers (jurisdictions) have the least variation between schools, but relatively high levels of student variation within schools. This is due to the policy practices of inclusion and attempts to ensure system-wide equity in education. For British education policy-makers and legislators such a view leaves much to think about as the system heads in a contrary direction.

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