

The Leaning Tower of PISA Creates Another Crisis

Gord Bambrick

Towering over the landscape of education reform these days is PISA (the Programme for International Student Assessment). Its international rankings in math, science and literacy are held as the gold standard of education quality measurement, and this gives the PISA test-makers enormous power over how education policy is set. As a *Globe and Mail* editorial explains, "Andreas Schleicher is arguably the most influential person in global education policy today. The German statistician has never presided over



a classroom or served as a minister of education. But as the man who designed and oversees the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), he holds sway over the direction of education reform around the world."

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/globe-debate/editorials/canadian-education-the-math-just-doesnt-add-up/article16274423/>

But is a set of assessments, administered to a sampling of fifteen-year-olds, every three years, something we can trust to be reliable or objective?

As the education branch of the global free trade think-tank known as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), PISA is preoccupied with education's benefit to the economy. Schools are seen as an "investment" in the production of skilled workers ("human capital") for the workforce. Thus, the OECD and PISA's primary impact has been to

reframe education as a competition between countries for future employment. Whether PISA scores really can predict who will get the jobs in ten or twenty years remains to be seen, but one thing is for certain: transforming education into a global competition for jobs panders to the many multi-national corporations who influence the OECD via the Business and Industry Advisory Committee to the OECD. Thus, it's safe to say that subjects which don't have direct return on investment to the multinational corporations, such as history, philosophy, art, or physical education are not likely to count for much. The big banks, however, might have more use for the subject of "financial literacy", which has recently been added. And computer skills, will probably soon be appearing on PISA now that Cisco, Intel and Microsoft are working together on a project headed by Barry McGaw, the former director of education with the OECD, to help make "information and communications technology (ICT) competence" part of the test.

http://newsroom.cisco.com/dlls/2009/prod_011309.html

Another source of business influence within PISA is its recent decision to hire the Pearson corporation to administer its future assessments. It seems likely that Pearson, the world's largest commercial supplier of education improvement products, such as curriculum, student assessment and testing, teacher evaluation, and data warehousing, is going to find a lot more things that need improving.

<http://uk.pearson.com/home/news/2011/september/pearson-to-develop-frameworks-for-oecd-pisa-student-assessment-for-2015.html>

Unlike the corporations that strongly influence the OECD, we have no way to influence global education policy. Furthermore, PISA and the OECD's power to control the way we perceive education undermines the authority of local, democratic levers of control, such as school boards and our provincial government. For example, the pressure generated from

Ontario's recent three-country decline in math standings resulted in our Ministry of Education instantly dedicating four million dollars into retraining teachers in math. Hopefully that money doesn't come out of any other key funding.

Indeed, PISA-Panic also proves very useful to the many business think-tanks in Canada which seek to reform education in the directions of raising human capital outputs, running schools more like businesses, and privatizing delivery.

For example, on the heels of the release of PISA's rankings in late November, which dropped Canada's math standing from 10th to 13th among 66 countries, the Canadian Council of Chief Executives (CCCE) blitzed Canada's news media with headlines such as "Business leaders ringing alarm bell on falling literacy, numeracy rates; call for improvements to education" and "Canada's fall in math-education ranking sets off alarm bells". In the latter article, CCCE's spokesman, John Manley, proclaims "this is on the scale of a national emergency.... We've got the natural resource sector to pay the rent, but that just keeps us in the house. We need skills, we need knowledge-workers to really improve our prosperity and build our society ... Having the skills becomes a very important element to attracting investment and creating jobs." Hardly an unbiased group, the CCCE consists of 150 of Canada's CEOs. Despite their seemingly patriotic concern over "falling behind", the CCCE's members represent a considerable number of multinational corporations with no national allegiances whatsoever. Making an average of about 170 times the average worker's wage in Canada, their allegiance is to their companies, not to you and me, whose wages and social services cut into their profits. Should it surprise us that the CCCE's front man depicts our natural resources as "paying the rent" while our current education is threatening to bankrupt us?

Not surprisingly, a month after launching its panic attack, the CCCE published a report on "Effective management of human capital in schools." This well-timed

"solution" paper got a nice headline from the *Globe and Mail* ("Teachers' pay should be based on performance, not years worked") and it echoes the theme of most of today's corporate reform think-tank "research" (not to mention earlier work by the CCCE), which is that in order to get more skilled human capital out of our kids, we need to increase the level of competition for teaching jobs, through schemes of merit pay which attach to student results, and the removal of teacher seniority and job security: "Unfortunately, current human resource policies in Canadian public schools – in particular, policies dealing with the hiring, evaluation and pay of teachers – do not align with this objective. In effect, current policies pretend that all teachers are of equal ability, when this is clearly not the case."

<http://www.ceocouncil.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Sachin-Maharaj-January-2014-FINAL.pdf>

This constant bombardment in the press leads to attacks on the credibility of the teaching profession and teacher unions, which are depicted as "protecting mediocrity", especially in the US and UK, where reform is a few years ahead of us. Considering that teacher unions are the only force that stands in the way of turning schools into factories for "human capital", it makes perfect sense for corporations to go on the offensive with an issue calculated to divide teachers against themselves and their unions, and set the public against them, too.

What can we do? By far the most important thing we can do right now is stand up against Canada's participation in international testing. For a long time teachers have spoken out against EQAO, while PISA has often been lauded for its work (especially when we held a higher ranking). No region is immune to a PISA Crises for very long, and it's up OSSTF members to expose the PISA agenda, and how it is being used, to the public through such media as letters-to-the-editor, news blogs and radio call-in shows. Education should be framed as a basic human right, not a competition. We don't want our own profession reduced to mere competition either, or all too soon we will find ourselves living the same fate as teachers in the US, where, as Henry Giroux observes, "teachers are now being deskilled, unceremoniously removed from the

process of school governance, largely reduced to clerks of corporate sovereignty...."

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