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# International Perspectives on School Settings, Education Policy and Digital Strategies

A Transatlantic Discourse in Education Research

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# Data, Diagnosis and Prescription: Governing Schooling through the OECD's PISA for Schools

Steven Lewis<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Introduction

This chapter explores *PISA for Schools*, an instrument developed by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), in collaboration with a diverse array of (largely US-based) partner organizations, including philanthropic foundations, not-for-profit agencies and commercial edu-businesses. PISA for Schools, a school-based variant of the OECD's influential Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) test, not only assesses school performance in reading, mathematics and science against international schooling systems, but also promotes examples of what the OECD presents as best practices from notionally world-class schooling systems (i.e., as measured by PISA), as well as the policy expertise of the OECD itself. This arguably reflects the expanding scope, scale and explanatory power of the OECD's education policy work (Sellar and Lingard 2014), which helps extend the relevance of PISA beyond national policymakers and political leaders into decidedly more *local* schooling spaces (i.e., schools and schooling districts). Specifically, my focus here is how PISA for Schools helps to constitute new spaces and relations of global education policymaking, and how these emergent relational or *topological*, spatialities enable the OECD to influence how schooling is locally thought and practiced.

The emergence of global governance in education has been documented during the previous two decades (Lewis/Lingard 2015; Meyer/Benavot 2013), with such global processes, discourses and relations recognized as exerting considerable influence over how schooling is enacted in national and, increasingly, subnational (e.g., state/province, schooling district, school) spaces. While the nature and effects of these developments have often been examined at the level of national (and subnational/state) schooling systems, there has been less consideration given to how such global policy ensembles seek to influence, and actually do influence, local schooling spaces. I wish to emphasize here the relational and productive capacities of space to examine how the OECD can now exercise educational governance by, topologically

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speaking, “reaching into” (Allen/Cochrane 2010: 1075) more practice-focused schooling spaces, rather than remaining at the policy level of the global and nation-state *vis-à-vis* the main PISA test. Given the significant, and frequently documented, normative influences exerted by main PISA and the OECD on national schooling systems (Fischman et al. 2019; Rautalin/Alasuutari/Vento 2019), it seems logical that PISA for Schools should warrant a similar level of critical scrutiny, particularly for its potential to respatialize relations of educational governance and position schools within what is now a global space of measurement and comparison.

In what follows, I first briefly describe the PISA for Schools test. Then, I introduce my theoretical framework, which draws together diverse thinking around commensuration, the increasing role of data, and processes of *datafication* (Hartong/Piattoeva 2019; Jarke/Breiter 2019; Lewis/Holloway 2019; Lycett 2013) in contemporary schooling governance and practice. In particular, I employ Simons’ (2015) notion of governing by examples to understand how the inclusion of best practices – alongside quantitative performance data – within the PISA for Schools report constitutes a unique form of evidence, facilitating new modalities of global education governance within decidedly local schooling spaces; that is, *governing by best practice* (Lewis 2017). Best practice in this way can thus be considered an integral form of *soft* qualitative evidence – such as PISA-informed policies and practices – that works alongside *hard* quantitative performance data. My analyses suggest that PISA for Schools exerts a governing influence through both numbers *and* examples, which allows the OECD to discursively and normatively constrain how world-class schools and systems, and their policies and practices, are defined.

## 2. PISA for Schools: the test and report

PISA for Schools – known in the USA as the *OECD Test for Schools (based on PISA)* – is similar in design and appearance to the main PISA survey, comprising a two-hour written test that assesses the ability of 15-year-old students to apply their acquired classroom knowledge in reading, mathematics and science to notionally real-world situations. Like the main PISA exam taken by schooling systems, PISA for Schools is not aligned to any particular national curriculum. Unlike the main PISA test, however, PISA for Schools assesses (and compares) a school’s local performance in reading, mathematics and science against that of schooling systems. In addition to assessing student performance, the test contains student and principal questionnaires that generate contextual information about particular in-school (e.g., class disciplinary climate) and out-of-school influences (e.g., student attitudes

towards reading) on student learning. These contextual questionnaires ask students questions about the learning environment and student engagement with their teachers and school classes, while principals respond to questions concerning school resourcing, governance and the socio-economic makeup of the school community. Such contextual information allows subject performance data (in reading, mathematics and science) to be reported against relative socio-economic advantage, as well as student attitudes towards the teaching and learning of these respective subjects.

Development of the program began in 2010, with English-speaking US, UK and Canadian schools invited by the OECD in late 2011 to participate in a pilot study. This was designed to equate the new school-based test with main PISA, so that direct comparisons could be made between school (PISA for Schools) and schooling system (main PISA) performance. PISA for Schools test items were developed according to the relevant PISA assessment frameworks for reading, mathematics and science, and equated to the existing PISA scales (Level 1 to Level 6) by simultaneously anchoring them with main PISA “link items” against a common PISA metric. This process enabled PISA for Schools scores for reading, mathematics and science to be reported against the established PISA proficiency scales, and against the performance of schooling systems as measured by main PISA. Following a successful field trial of 127 schools, PISA for Schools was officially launched in the USA in April 2013, and made available to all eligible schools and districts throughout the country. Since this time, PISA for Schools has experienced a significant expansion in terms of its availability and administration<sup>2</sup>. As of 2020, PISA for Schools is available in twelve languages across fourteen countries, and it has been cumulatively administered in more than 2,200 schools globally (OECD 2019a).<sup>3</sup>

Another key feature of PISA for Schools is the school-level report provided by the national accredited provider (OECD 2017). All schools participating in PISA for Schools receive a report that analyzes their students’ performance and contextual data, as well as providing examples of best practices from high performing international schooling systems (e.g.,

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- 2 Janison Education Group (‘Janison’), an Australian for-profit education technology company, was announced in 2019 as the global provider of the software platform on which the online version of PISA for Schools is delivered. Since then, it has signed agreements with the National Service Providers (NSPs) of Brazil (June 2019) and the Russian Federation (September 2019). In October 2019, Janison announced that it was also accredited to be the sole NSP for all U.S. schools. At the time of publication, with Janison as the accredited NSP for the U.S., schools pay US\$5,000 to participate in the online version PISA for Schools.
  - 3 PISA for Schools is now available in the following 14 jurisdictions: Andorra, Brazil, Brunei Darussalam, China (PRC), Colombia, Japan, Pakistan, Portugal, Russia, Spain, Thailand, the United Arab Emirates, the UK and the USA. It is also deliverable in the following 12 languages: Arabic, Basque, Catalan, English, Galician, Japanese, Mandarin (Chinese), Portuguese, Russian, Spanish (Castilian), Thai and Welsh.



Shanghai-China, Finland, Singapore) and excerpts from the OECD's broader educational policy research. However, and besides the graphs and tables representing a school's specific data around student performance or local contextual factors, the report is otherwise entirely identical for all participating schools within the same national jurisdiction (e.g., the US). For instance, the examples of best practice within the report, as well as the excerpts from other OECD research publications, are *identical* for all US schools, and there are no modifications to the report contents to acknowledge a school's specific context (e.g., whether a school is deemed high/low performing on PISA for Schools). This arguably promotes the logic that *all* schools both equally require and can benefit from the same OECD policy lessons, even if such assumptions problematically downplay the role of local context and non-educational effects to performance on standardized assessments like PISA (Feniger/Lefstein 2014; Meyer/Schiller 2013; Tan/Yang 2019).

### **3. Commensuration, datafication and governing by examples**

Commensuration, or the “transformation of different qualities into a common metric” (Espeland/Stevens 1998: 314), is by no means a recent phenomenon. Much attention has previously been paid to the role of numbers and statistics in the historical constitution of the nation-state as a knowable, and governable, political space (see Desrosières 1998; Hacking 1990; Porter 1995). Indeed, these data help inscribe the very spaces they purport to represent, achieving what has been described as “the mutual construction of statistics and society” (Sætnan/Lomell/Hammer 2011: 1), and numbers have played a central role in helping to constitute a commensurate global education policy field (Lingard and Rawolle 2011). However, while the productive capacities of numbers and data are largely beyond question, it is worth problematizing precisely *what* is produced in these processes of commensuration, and particularly how these common spaces of measurement can “render some aspects of life invisible or irrelevant” (Espeland/Stevens 1998: 314). As Ball (2003: 217) argues in his examination of performativity upon the soul of the teacher, such data-driven commensuration helps translate “complex social processes and events into simple figures or categories of judgement”, which often has considerable consequences for how teachers and teaching itself are constituted (Holloway/Brass 2018; Lewis/Holloway 2019). Moreover, abstracting complex qualities into simple and reductive quantities through data-driven processes of commensuration “will unavoidably channel users

towards some kinds of inferences and/or actions more readily than others” (Lycett 2013: 384; emphasis added). It is these dual effects of commensuration, simultaneously both reductive *and* productive, that help to illuminate how internationally comparative measures of schooling performance and PISA for Schools in particular, help to enable the governance of education.

Building on such processes of commensuration is the increasing focus on data, and especially digital data. To this end, I consider the *datafication* of education as enabling (and even encouraging) every aspect of schooling, students and teachers to be constituted *as data* – to be collected, analyzed, surveilled and controlled (Bradbury 2019; Selwyn/Henderson/Chao 2015; Williamson 2017). This inclination to datafication has been followed, in turn, by the emergence of new *digital technologies* (e.g., data dashboards, learning platform observation apps, etc.), *services* (e.g., data analysis) and even *professionals* (e.g., data stewards, technology coaches), subjecting schools and schooling systems to unforeseen levels of surveillance and control. It is important to note, however, that constructions of schooling accountability, practices and leadership are never purely technical procedures, but are instead a complex entanglement of very different (technical and social) logics, practices and problems (see, for instance, Hartong/Förschler 2019; Hartong/Piattoeva 2019; Lewis/Hardy 2017). Far from somehow being neutral or objective, such data-centric processes – of collecting, recoding, storing, analyzing, distributing and comparing data – have now become integral features of contemporary modes of digital educational governance (Hartong 2016; Thompson/Sellar 2018; Williamson 2016).

These putatively objective data have also been used to legitimate prospective policy decisions in what has been described as *evidence-informed* policymaking (Lingard 2013). Similar to the production of data being informed by contingent socio-technical factors, the use of such evidence is never purely objective, but is instead always mediated by political judgments, prioritization and values. Even so, the centrality of *hard* data to educational governance and policymaking should not lead us to overlook newer modalities that incorporate other *soft(er)* forms of qualitative evidence, including examples of what works. Such evidence-informed policymaking can be considered, in this instance, to have progressed from merely addressing, on the basis of performance measures and comparisons, “*Is reform necessary?*” Indeed, perhaps the more pressing question these forms of evidence force us to now ask is “*What type of reform is necessary?*” Simons (2015: 715) usefully describes this evolution of governing through data as “governing by examples”:

[G]overning through evidence is not only about governing by numbers but also includes a mode of *governing by examples*. To a large extent, the examples of good practice are examples of good performance and are being decided upon available

numerical performance data. In that sense, governing by examples is to be regarded as complementary to governing by numbers. (emphasis added, SL)

Here, *qualitative* forms of evidence – such as narrative accounts, examples of successful practices and even educators’ own professional experiences – are used to provide additional richness to enumerations of performance, but these qualitative accounts are still framed in terms of their ability to improve *quantitative* performance. That is, for best practices to “work”, they must demonstrate the ability to improve performance in a way that can then be captured *quantitatively* (e.g., via standardized tests, such as PISA for Schools). This has arguably led to a disproportionate focus by researchers, policymakers and educators seeking to determine the policies and practices of top-performing schooling systems (Auld/Morris 2016; Lewis 2017).

Herein is the central premise of most (if not all) large-scale international assessments, where culturally different and geographically distant schooling systems and schools are rendered relationally – or *topologically* – proximate through reference to common measures and metrics (see Lewis/Sellar/Lingard 2016). This creates a situation whereby school performance is not only able to be compared but, in fact, *should be* compared, and where such comparisons are seen as a valid way of informing local schooling policies through a looking around at, and learning from, the global. Taking this rationale of policy borrowing from successful schooling systems to its ultimate (if not necessarily logical) conclusion, I would argue, in agreement with Kamens (2013: 124), that “[i]f one can compare school systems [or schools] in terms of their characteristics and outcomes, the idea of borrowing features from the ‘best’ systems is a natural corollary”. As we shall see, however, the rationales underpinning the search for decontextualized, data-driven best practices can lead to a significant “oversimplification of more complex contexts and issues” (Wiseman 2010: 4). This can, in turn, produce problematic consequences for the local teachers and school leaders who might attempt to uncritically borrow examples of what works.

#### **4. Defining “what works” through data**

A central aspect of the OECD’s educational governance is arguably the creation of a commensurate space of PISA measurement, within which participating schools and schooling systems are rendered knowable and comparable through reference to PISA data and assessment frameworks. This putative commonality then enables PISA for Schools performance, and especially any perceived *difference* in performance data between schools and high-performing schooling systems, to be used to justify school-level reform

measures (see also Lewis 2018). However, the question of *which* reforms should be implemented, and *how* such reforms might be undertaken, remain stubbornly unanswered on the basis of performance data alone.

It is here that the inclusion of global best practices in the PISA for Schools reports helps the OECD to further steer local processes of schooling reform, with these qualitative examples of successful policies and practices accompanying the quantitative data that compares local (school) and international (schooling system) PISA performance. Besides simply measuring a school's relative performance, a key governing modality of PISA for Schools is the promotion of certain strategies, policies and practices from high performing schooling systems to participating schools. To this end, the OECD has mandated the inclusion of prominent breakout boxes in the PISA for Schools report that highlight the policies and practices of celebrated PISA poster children, including Shanghai-China, Singapore, Finland and Japan. Significantly, these schooling systems have been determined (on the basis of their performance on main PISA) to be "the world's top performing school systems" (OECD 2019b), with the implication being that schools now have a ready prescription of *how* they should act in order to be among other notionally top-performing systems. Such practices also help to validate and strengthen the policy credentials of the OECD, as the inclusion of what works from PISA-validated schooling systems suggests that these policy solutions are already *tried and tested*. By establishing this pedigree of successful implementation in other high performing systems, the OECD is clearly encouraging local educators to have confidence in the efficacy of the proffered policy reforms – namely, that what works actually *works*.

Best practice is thereby understood entirely by reference to schooling system performance on main PISA, while other potential considerations of best practice are excluded. We can see then the productive power of such discourses, and how it is the OECD (and not teachers, schools or districts) that ultimately controls *who* is high performing and, in turn, *which* are the best practices responsible for such performance. Even the concept of best practice itself is presented through PISA for Schools in a largely unproblematized and self-evident manner, as though participating teachers and schools should no more question the notion of best practice than they should the OECD's representation of these very practices. As noted in the PISA for Schools *Technical Report*,

[...] the PFS [PISA for Schools] provides important peer-to-peer learning opportunities for educators – locally, nationally and internationally – as well as the opportunity to share good practices to help identify "what works" to improve learning and build better skills for better lives. (OECD 2015: 9)

Moreover, the OECD (2013: 5) even suggests the "sharing of effective practices" between international schooling systems and local schools via the PISA for Schools report is a "logical next step" when school leaders look to

implement schooling reform processes. Teachers are thus presented with a deceptively linear relationship between i) measuring schooling performance, ii) determining what works within other putatively successful schooling systems and then iii) adopting these self-same practices in order to improve learning outcomes at local schooling sites.

The inclusion of best practice in the PISA for Schools reports specifies an ensemble of qualitative evidence from school systems with quantitative success on main PISA, providing the necessary complementarity between quantitative and qualitative forms of evidence, and governance by numbers *and* examples (see Simons 2015). Poor local performance on PISA for Schools, especially when compared with that of high-performing schooling systems, arguably encourages participating schools to adopt the OECD's proffered examples of best practice, where the hard evidence of numerical data authoritatively validates the soft examples of best practice. Further reflecting this complementarity of numbers and examples, schools are seemingly encouraged to look to Shanghai-China, a normative "looking east" (Sellar/Lingard 2013a) that is presumably based on the municipality's world-leading performance on PISA. The OECD's logic here is, in turn, inescapable: successful performance is attributable to successful practices, and such practices can be readily transferred between settings and contexts.

The supposed link between success on PISA and the implementation of successful policies thus presents such examples of best practice in, arguably, a causal light, as though the adoption of certain schooling policies is directly responsible for (measurable) improvements in student performance data. However, this largely ignores the numerous non-policy factors that can (and frequently do) influence student learning and PISA performance outcomes (Feniger/Lefstein 2014; Meyer/Schiller 2013). Instead, policy is positioned as the overwhelming influence on school performance while culture is understood as something *external* to schooling, rather than culture being central to how education is locally understood and given meaning. As such, there is little overt consideration given to how participating schools and notionally high performing systems might also be substantively *different* in terms of socio-economic, cultural, historical or geographic factors. This decoupling of best practice from its original context demonstrates the largely epistemological nature of the OECD's global educational governance and influence, which depends on "stressing the importance of policy factors over the effects of cultural and social context" (Sellar/Lingard 2013b: 723).

It is this PISA-mediated linking of performance and best practice that enables the OECD to normatively define both what schools should strive towards (i.e., PISA-world class status) *and* how they should notionally attain such goals (i.e., adopt global best practices), with the processes of data-driven diagnosis and prescription being inseparably intertwined and, importantly, the OECD positioned as *the* global expert on matters of education policy. This

sense that the OECD “knows best” is clearly evident, providing education policy advice that seemingly elides contextual considerations within, and between, local schools and national schooling systems, reducing the potential for schools to individualize their policy responses in ways that address and acknowledge local contexts. As Grek (2013: 707) rather tellingly notes, this supposedly universal advice reflects the OECD’s imbrication of knowledge and policy so that knowledge *is* policy, in which “expertise and the selling of undisputed, universal policy solutions drift into one single entity and function”.

I should emphasize here there is nothing innately wrong with local educators accessing the work of the OECD, or any other policy authority for that matter, to help inform their teaching practice and reform measures. However, it *is* arguably problematic when PISA data becomes the dominant (or only) contribution to this process, with the danger being that the OECD becomes the overwhelming authority on schooling, rather than just one voice amongst many. I would also stress here how the increasing reliance on data as the means to understand and evaluate schooling, and the subsequent necessity of external data experts (e.g., statisticians, data technicians) to analyze and interpret these data, risks displacing other more professionally-oriented forms of expertise and knowledge, such as that possessed by the teaching profession (see, for instance, Lewis/Holloway 2019). This shifts not only where expertise is located, but also how such expertise is determined – what becomes most valued is the ability to understand and respond to data in a way that will, in turn, produce favorable improvements to data. In this way, the OECD may well be able to authorize what counts as valued evidence for the schools and districts that choose to participate in PISA for Schools, thereby limiting the possible ways in which schooling might be alternatively understood and practiced. We can thus see how the ready-made nature of the OECD’s proffered best practices facilitates their local uptake by schools and districts, but without first ensuring that these practices are understood in the context of the countries and systems from which they are being borrowed, or how they might align with the context.

## **5. Conclusion: data-driven diagnoses and PISA for Schools**

I have argued here that PISA for Schools facilitates international school-to-system (and school-to-school) comparisons, situating participating schools and schooling systems within a common global education policy field (Lingard/Rawolle 2011). Importantly, this also allows their local performance data to be evaluated against notionally high-performing or fast-improving schooling systems, as determined by the results of main PISA (e.g., Shanghai-

China, Singapore, Finland). While certainly not the first time that transnational data have helped to produce commensurate global or regional education policy spaces, the inclusion of *individual schools* marks what is, arguably, a significant development. In this sense, the OECD presents PISA for Schools as a logical *next step* for local policymakers and educators, being an effective means to obtain knowledge on school performance in the same way that main PISA purportedly evaluates national systems. Participating schools can thus receive the *imprimatur* of the OECD, demonstrating to local, national and international stakeholders that they are an OECD-approved world-class institution that adequately prepares its students for educational success in the global economy. The ability of PISA for Schools to produce legitimate and internationally recognized proof of a school's performance may thus make such evidence a valued commodity for local communities, and especially so for schools that are doing well in relation to national under-performance on main PISA (e.g., the decreasing national performance of the USA).

In effect, PISA for Schools serves a dual role, providing a data-driven diagnosis of local performance *and* a prescription of the policies that should be implemented to improve performance. Consequently, the dominant rationale around best practice in the PISA for Schools report might best be described as solutions looking for a problem, with the OECD ostensibly determining which set of global best practices is most appropriate for local implementation by all schools in all circumstances. Arguably, this makes sitting the test, and the data that are generated, somewhat redundant beyond providing schools with the impetus to act upon the OECD's policy recommendations. In this, we can perhaps see evidence of what Jessop (2008) describes as "policy Darwinism", whereby certain policies – in this instance, those of the OECD – come to discursively and materially dominate, and possibly even exclude, other articulations and futures of schooling.

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