

PISA in the mirror: global accountability or cross-cultural learning?

O *PISA* no espelho: *accountability* global ou aprendizagem transcultural?

PISA en el espejo: ¿*accountability* global ó aprendizaje transcultural?

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a conceptual analysis of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA) through the lens of organizational sociology. Building upon a narrative review of the literature, it explores drivers behind the current prominence of PISA, using concepts derived from rational systems, social efficiency, and new institutionalist approaches. From the analysis of PISA's rationales, logics of operation, and impacts, the key finding is that PISA's power and limitations function as a mirror, reflecting coinciding features of the program's design and OECD's characteristics that are mobilized by critics and supporters in opposite directions. Given PISA's appeal to policymakers, the paper calls for further research to uncover its cross-cultural learning potential, instead of reinforcing it as a global accountability and standardization tool.

Keywords

PISA. OECD. Global Governance. Organizational sociology.

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RESUMO: Este artigo apresenta uma análise conceitual do Programa Internacional de Avaliação de Alunos (PISA), da Organização para a Cooperação e o Desenvolvimento Econômico (OCDE), sob a perspectiva da sociologia organizacional. Com base em uma revisão narrativa da literatura, o artigo explora fatores subjacentes à atual proeminência do PISA, utilizando conceitos derivados das abordagens de sistemas racionais, da eficiência social e do neoinstitucionalismo. A partir da análise de seus fundamentos implícitos, lógicas de operação e impactos, a principal conclusão é que o poder e as limitações do PISA funcionam como um espelho, que reflete aspectos do desenho do programa e de características da OCDE, mobilizados por apoiadores e críticos em direções opostas. Dado o apelo do PISA junto aos formuladores de políticas, o artigo sugere o aprofundamento de pesquisas que possam revelar seu potencial para a aprendizagem transcultural, em vez de reforçá-lo como uma ferramenta global de *accountability* e padronização.

Palavras-chave: PISA. OCDE. Governança global. Sociologia organizacional.

RESUMEN: Este artículo presenta un análisis conceptual del Programa para la Evaluación Internacional de Estudiantes (PISA) de la Organización para la Cooperación y el Desarrollo Económico (OCDE), utilizando la perspectiva de la sociología organizacional. Basado en una revisión narrativa de la literatura, el artículo explora factores que subyacen a la prominencia actual de PISA, utilizando conceptos derivados de los enfoques de sistemas racionales, eficiencia social y neoinstitucionalismo. A partir del análisis de los fundamentos de PISA, su lógica de funcionamiento e impactos, la principal conclusión es que el poder y las limitaciones del programa funcionan como un espejo, que refleja aspectos del diseño de PISA y características de la OCDE que son movilizados por defensores y críticos en direcciones opuestas. Dado el atractivo de PISA para los formuladores de políticas, el artículo exhorta a realizar más investigaciones que podrían revelar su potencial para el aprendizaje transcultural, en lugar de reforzarlo como una herramienta global para la rendición de cuentas y la estandarización.

Palabras clave: PISA; OCDE. Gobernanza global. Sociología organizacional.

Introduction

The beginning of the 21st century has been characterized by the increased visibility of international large-scale assessments in education policy and discourse. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), promoted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), ranks higher than any other in this respect. PISA combines a high-profile stance as a policy-oriented tool with contrasting views among education researchers and practitioners. Its reach, scope, and influence have been all but growing in the last two decades, accompanied by substantial scholarly criticism (e.g. Gorur, 2016; Grey & Morris, 2023; H.-D. Meyer & Benavot, 2013; Ozga, 2023; Zhao, 2020).

In fact, a systematic review of PISA-related peer-reviewed literature found an “unsettling divide” (Hopfenbeck et al., 2018, p. 347). While the bulk of published research builds upon PISA data to explore relevant educational issues in the form of secondary analyses, there is no dearth of

papers pointing out PISA’s detrimental effects and recommending caution on its policy use. Given this divide, this paper seeks to contribute to the discussion on PISA with a conceptual analysis through the lens of organizational sociology. Building upon a narrative review of the literature, it explores drivers behind the current prominence of PISA, vis-à-vis the arguments mobilized by supporters and critics.

The analysis engages with PISA’s implicit and explicit rationales, logics of operation, and effects. The key finding is that PISA’s power and limitations lie in somewhat coinciding features, related to the program’s design and OECD’s characteristics. Thus, given PISA’s seemingly inescapable appeal for policymakers, the paper calls for further research to uncover its cross-cultural learning potential, rather than reinforce it as a tool of global accountability and standardization.

A brief review of PISA

PISA is organized in three-year assessment cycles covering reading, math, and science literacy among 15-year-olds. Its first round happened in the year 2000, with 28 OECD members and four other participating countries. Throughout its cycles, it has multiplied this figure, now engaging more than 90 participant countries – or “economies”, in OECD terms. PISA has also expanded its scope beyond cognitive domains, with add-on questionnaires and surveys on students’ values, attitudes, and learning strategies; assessments of socioemotional skills and competences, such as collaborative problem-solving,

creativity, resilience, financial and digital literacy, and global competence; school-related variables, such as class size, school climate and teachers’ and principals’ profiles and practices; as well as family variables, including parental characteristics, expectations and perceptions on education (OECD, 2018b).

As it grew, PISA came to encompass new initiatives, amplifying its scale horizontally, towards more countries, and vertically, towards local educational spaces and actors. An example of horizontal expansion is PISA for Development, which provides

specific adaptations and capacity-building to expand the coverage of PISA tests to low- and middle-income countries (Addey, 2021; Auld et al., 2020; OECD, 2018a). Regarding vertical expansions, a notable case is Pisa for Schools, an on-demand test featured to deliver school-level results allowing for comparisons of individual schools with particular countries, with the stated aims of fostering school improvement, benchmarking and the development of a peer-learning network at the global level (Lewis, 2019; OECD, n.d.).

PISA's general results include not only rankings of student performance, but also analyses of their correlates. It feeds into the production of numerous policy-oriented thematic reports and country analyses by the OECD itself, which aim at providing an evidence base of "what works", "how" and "when" in education. According to its developers, its global scope, regularity, policy-orientation and focus on skills, rather than curricular topics, are some of the features that make it unique (OECD, 2018b). In the words of the OECD, for the last 20 years PISA has become "the world's premier yardstick for comparing quality, equity and efficiency in learning outcomes across countries, and an influential force for education reform" (Schleicher, 2019).

In line with this view, PISA's results have made headlines around the world, with a more or less positive tone according to each country's position in the league tables and, as different rounds take place, upward, downward, or stagnant scores. As such, the literature has discussed how "PISA shocks" have generated alarmism and stirred education systems, as well as how high achievement entailed the creation of "reference societies" for benchmarking education internationally (Gorur, 2016; Waldow, 2017).

PISA has also been the object of considerable criticism. Initially voiced in specialized journals and conferences, critical voices have moved towards wider audiences. In 2014, academics from different countries published a letter in a British newspaper, arguing that "OECD and Pisa tests [were] damaging education worldwide". The letter, personally addressed to PISA's director, called for a review of PISA practices, including: the development of more meaningful alternatives to the national league tables; broader constituency participation in assessment design and oversight; greater transparency on participation costs and public-private partnerships involved in PISA development; open technical oversight; and an overall slowing down of the "testing juggernaut" (Andrews et al., 2014)

The letter enticed a brief reply by the OECD (Schleicher, 2014), generally dismissing most of the claims and reinstating the value of PISA as a platform of international collaboration. Criticism did not subside, as evidenced by a post-script authored by one of the initial letter's main proponents (H.-D. Meyer, 2014). Indeed, the controversy around PISA by no means decreased, as the program expanded. On the contrary, as PISA results are published, critical scholarly voices highlight PISA's problematic view of education, its implementation, interpretation and impacts (Zhao, 2020).

A systematic review of peer-reviewed literature on PISA yielded 654 papers on the topic, considering articles published up to 2014 and in the English language only (Hopfenbeck et al., 2018). The papers dealt with three main topics. The first relates to policy impacts, reflecting matters of governance and PISA's effects at different levels. The second covers several types of critique, including technical aspects and the contribution of PISA to the advancement of

a deleterious accountability agenda. Both topics share a somewhat overlapping critical ground on PISA's governance effects.

The third topic identified in the systematic review contemplates a significant body of secondary analyses focusing on PISA results themselves, exploring correlations, extending comparisons, distinguishing trends, and linking performance to policy (Hopfenbeck et al., 2018). Since studies in this last category do not typically discuss the value of PISA per se, their perspective tends to be less critical. In fact, secondary analyses tacitly lend PISA legitimacy by engaging with its results to create new knowledge.

A similarly more optimistic view around the value of PISA that has been presented is to frame it as a conducive initiative to create privileged spaces for genuine international collaboration and global cross-cultural learning (Mehta & Peterson, 2019). This collaborative feature, coupled with PISA's potential for becoming a knowledge-sharing base that leverages global educational success, is embraced and advocated by the OECD itself. In this regard, for instance, when reflecting on PISA 2018 results, the organization maintains that PISA's greatest strength lies in country ownership and

"crowdsourcing" methods, with expertise drawn from participating countries, the OECD secretariat and the contractors involved in the assessment (Schleicher, 2019).

In relation to this claim, it is interesting to look at PISA's origins, as an initiative that did not come from the OECD secretariat but originated from a member-country network within the organization (McGaw, 2008). Led by the United States, this group was part of a broader effort initiated in the late 1980s to develop a set of internationally comparable education indicators, prompted by demands related to improving education statistics for policy-related work. One of its results was the creation of an international indicators program which led to the annual publication *Education at a Glance*. Another, given the growing focus on education outcomes, besides inputs, was the creation of a new learning assessment, which was formally instituted as PISA in 1997. After more than two decades, PISA grew to become a truly global phenomenon.

The power and the caveats of PISA

The power garnished by PISA in the education agenda can be broken into two factors discussed under the lens of organizational sociology theories. The first is connected to PISA's model itself. The second is linked to the OECD's identity and position. In both, a curious mirror game seems to be in place: features that constitute the essence of PISA's power correspond to structural problems in the view of its critics.

The PISA model: rational systems in institutional environments

The PISA model seems to be a textbook example of rational systems in education (Davis & Scott, 2015). It epitomizes a comprehensive and sophisticated enactment of this tradition, which has long-standing roots in the education field. Tied to broad cultural changes and modernization

processes, rational systems thinking led to the creation of large educational bureaucracies and the massification of public schooling in the Global North from the late 19th century on. This approach has constituted a recurring impulse for educational reform throughout the 20th century, with common traces permeating each rationalization attempt (Mehta, 2013).

Rational systems generally tend to 1) attach a clear and singular goal to education; 2) emphasize formal structures in educational processes; and 3) attribute educational change to external pressures. These defining components are organized under the broad cultural paradigm of social efficiency ideology (Schiro, 2013). Therefore, in line with the notion of efficiency, rational systems' goal in education is to ensure "value for money" by equipping the new generations with the necessary "skills" to function in society. Most often, this skill set is linked to notions of individual productivity and aggregate economic growth through human capital improvements. As for structures, rational systems emphasize the use of quantifiable data and scientific management practices that connect means to ends in education. An integral part of this logic is the continuous measurement and monitoring of performance. The theory of change, in turn, is based on the combination of accountability mechanisms based on performance measures and incentive schemes designed to align individual and collective behavior to desired organizational results. Rather than coming from internal processes, in the logic of rational systems, improvement stems from outside pressure.

The most recent and acute manifestation of rational systems in the education world takes the form of standardized testing (Schiro, 2013). These tests are used as the main tool to continuously monitor the "yield"

of schooling, in the form of student learning. They can be high stakes, when connected to incentives in the form of sanctions and rewards for systems, schools, teachers or students. A softer version of contemporary rational systems thinking is the widespread advocacy of evidence-based policymaking, through the use of data to inform decision-making and generate ongoing feedback loops geared at reform and improvement.

Taking a harder or softer approach, rational systems seem to have become the dominant force in education thinking for the last three decades. As such, part of PISA's appeal emanates from its design as an accurate policy-oriented evidence tool in an age where governments increasingly value and rely on numbers and measurement to "manage" education in a cost-effective way. PISA responds well to this overall shared belief, cultural ambiance, or hegemonic mindset, which Mehta (2013) aptly describes as "the allure of order", fitting into an overarching accountability institutional paradigm (Fischman et al., 2019). This paradigm, in turn, shapes the boundaries and frames of the whole debate about education, including who are the actors with reputed legitimacy to engage in it and the general environment where educational organizations operate.

Moreover, PISA gives external rationalization and accountability an extra twist, as it portrays the usual rational systems link between education and economic outcomes as a distinct, more directly established one, given the emergent context of a globalized "knowledge economy". In this regard, the logic of comparison across countries (or economies, a more precise term in this respect) is embedded in the perception of heightened, accelerated, and inescapable competition in a globalized world, where chances of success depend more than

anything on educational performance. Structural issues, such as labor market characteristics, pervasive credentialism, or asymmetric conditions to engage in global exchange flows, are not taken up by this overly positive picture of the economic possibilities opened up by education.

The framing of education as human capital creates an interesting paradox for PISA. On the one hand, human capital theory has been the object of solid criticism for being a reductionist and narrow perspective that assumes a one-way linear relationship between education and the economy (Klees, 2016; Komatsu & Rappleye, 2017). Along these lines, Labaree (2014) points out that PISA's utilitarian view ignores that the relationship between schooling and economic development may result from signaling and credentialing in the job market, rather than strict academic learning, and that the correlation between more schooling and economic growth might run the other way around, as richer countries are able to afford more schooling. Komatsu & Rappleye (2017) raise the issue that propagating the logic of human capital might even turn out to be detrimental to student learning overall, equating it to the easy path of test scores, rather than complex processes of personal transformation.

On the other hand, the same human capital framing attached to PISA has as one of its most immediate consequences an enhanced visibility and increased importance attributed to education among competing government agendas. Even if only in discourse, education seen as a booster of human capital and economic gains can become a priority at the highest level of policymaking across the range of the political spectrum. After all, economic growth, regardless of ideological affiliations,

uses to figure high on the to-do list of almost every political party.

This enhanced status is not only reflected in the political agenda. It also affects other institutional dimensions, as education becomes a field increasingly colonized by researchers and organizations from the higher status field of economics (Jabbar & Menashy, 2022). The OECD itself is an example of such, its acronym carrying an "E" for economic, not for educational cooperation and development. Also, education portrayed as the road to economic growth tends to get much more public opinion attention, galvanized by the same prevalent utilitarian perspective on the media.

In this respect, it is useful to highlight the strategic role played by the media in supporting PISA's power. Press attention to PISA has been weaved in a well-developed strategy by the OECD (Wiseman, 2013), adding momentum to its visibility. PISA's initial results, displayed in league tables, are internationally released in a coordinated way, including embargoed press kits allowing for simultaneous headlines and releases around the world.

Ultimately, the utilitarian perspective of rational systems embraced by PISA amplifies the constellation of education actors and stakeholders influencing its institutional environment. While this might be useful to build larger coalitions of support around educational improvement, the coalition tends to be dominated by those who espouse the same utilitarian view – and often privilege market-based perspectives. In this respect, giving rhetorical priority to education in the policy agenda does not necessarily entail the translation of this priority into actions and processes in line with educators' views.

Similar contradictions permeate other fundamental aspects of PISA. What makes

them appealing to some is exactly what makes them problematic to others. In this sense, the simplifications and reductionisms made possible by PISA's league tables and skills approach constitute the core of extensive critique. According to Labaree (2014), PISA arbitrarily chooses a set of alleged universally desirable skills that are not necessarily taught anywhere and whose actual relevance for "the knowledge economy" is based on unproven assumptions. Then, it normatively assumes that presenting evidence of mastering these skills on standardized tests equates to "good education". In this sense, the argument goes, PISA leaves out of the picture other important, more ambiguous, and hard-to-measure goals of the educational endeavor, which would be connected to creating democratic equality and promoting citizenship-building. Zhao (2020) corroborates this perspective, claiming that PISA puts forth a self-manufactured and homogenizing claim of what constitutes academic excellence.

However, on the other side of the mirror, the fact that PISA is not linked to national curricula, but rather to constructs that allegedly operationalize 21st-century skills, might make it even more attractive for policymakers (Steiner-Khamsi, 2019). It gives them more freedom and semantic flexibility to legitimize preferred reforms and eventually justify poor performance.

Cultural aspects are also highlighted by critics as missing from the PISA model (Labaree, 2014; H.-D. Meyer & Benavot, 2013; Zhao, 2020). In this regard, PISA fails to recognize that successful results can be a consequence of cultural factors that antecede or go beyond school or education systems. In addition, it is considered culturally biased, adopting a one-size-fits-all approach to what would be a "good" education system, based on the logics of

rich, Western countries. Paradoxically, the good performance of Asian countries and Chinese territories, in particular, has spurred criticism for glorifying authoritarian education models and students' self-blaming for achievement (Zhao, 2020).

The critique presented by Gorur (2016) goes one step further in exposing the mirror game of PISA's weaknesses and strengths. Analyzing PISA as part of an information assemblage of international indicators and comparative assessments that foster a "seeing like PISA" phenomenon, the author borrows from James Scott's influential perspective on "seeing like a State" (Scott, 2020). This way of seeing is characterized by reductionist features, such as the loss in detail, an adoption of simplified and superficial legibility, standardization in measurement leading to standardization in educational practice, excessive focus on external control and accountability, as well as a-critical promotion of templates as best practices.

Nevertheless, it seems that the combination of those exact features is what makes PISA and PISA messages an almost irresistible construct for the macro-level lenses used by policymakers. It is through these simplifications that policymakers – and wider audiences alike – can easily operationalize an ambiguous, amorphous and complex issue, such as education quality, in the succinct and digestible format of scores and rankings (Niemann & Martens, 2015). After all, grades and report cards are an all too familiar and legible way to portray educational information in general.

The "irresistibility" of league tables and commensuration is further discussed as a component of the institutionalization of an audit culture across society (Kamens, 2013). Education's linkage to the economy, combined with its intrinsic ambiguities and

loosely coupled functioning, have made it even more prone to this trend. That is, if education is such a crucial activity and if its core processes of teaching and learning take place inside thousands of classrooms, being so difficult to control, it might seem an appealing way to focus on outcomes to create incentives for the alignment of uncoordinated actors around desired results.

Therefore, even if critics have raised excellent points on the problems of PISA, it is difficult to ponder if and how the policy world could actually move away from it. And although there has been an effort to imagine that spreading the criticism could help aspirations of “a situation where PISA will eventually either be discontinued or, more likely, become as relevant as the OECD’s periodic unemployment reports” (H.-D. Meyer, 2014, p. 887), this has not happened and it is hard to envision it happening in the near future.

The OECD’s soft power: insights from new institutionalism

If these features of the PISA model help explain its power, what can we say about the OECD’s identity and position? The lens of new institutionalism shed some light in this respect. Similarly to rational systems, new institutionalism draws from Weberian traditions (Davies & Zarifa, 2009). However, new institutionalism focuses on the larger environment where education organizations are embedded, characterized by institutional features such as shared values, cultural norms, traditions, power relations, as well as formal regulations. According to this approach, in responding and adapting to complex institutional environments, education organizations pursue much more ambiguous goals than a functionalist utilitarian perspective would foresee. Their

results are also more uncertain, given that no direct line can be drawn between processes and outcomes. As such, rationality in education does not necessarily translate into optimal maximization of efficiency, but rather into adopting legitimacy-seeking activities. Isomorphism is a common approach in this sense. Following established templates – even if superficially, in the form of organizational mimicry or mere ceremonial compliance without effective change in core practices – might be one way for education systems and organizations to engage in legitimacy-seeking and buffer pressures from the outside.

In fact, legitimacy is a key concept in discussing the role of the OECD in PISA. The organization is accepted by governments as a neutral, trustworthy and expert source of high-quality knowledge, derived from an empirical base (Niemann & Martens, 2015). This technocratic reputation is a fundamental aspect to explain how the organization was able to enhance its normative power so significantly, through policy advice, identification of role models, setting of global agendas and diffusion of “best practices” across various fields.

In education, the role achieved by the OECD seems to be unparalleled. Before PISA took off as the worldwide standard of education quality, other international large-scale assessments had been carried out (and some continue to be), under the umbrella of the International Education Association (IEA) and UNESCO, for instance. But none of them reached the level of visibility and policy-relevance achieved by PISA (Labaree, 2014). The OECD’s weight and soft power in the global arena have played a key role in this respect, in a mutually reinforcing game with PISA’s growth.

Comparative education scholarship has discussed the emergence of a new institution – global education governance – where transnational and private actors take a prominent role in the reproduction of dominant ideologies through education (Mundy et al., 2016). In this context, the rise of the OECD as a powerful actor, exercising cognitive and epistemic forms of governance based on data, particularly PISA data, has been abundantly discussed (e.g. Jakobi & Martens, 2010; Martens & Wolf, 2009; Niemann & Martens, 2018; Sellar & Lingard, 2014).

Mirrored readings of the same phenomenon as a strength or a structural weakness are evident here as well. The OECD's legitimacy in leading the production of education data for policy, as appealing as it might be for policymakers and other constituencies, is seen as a fundamental problem by PISA critics (Andrews & et al., 2014). For the latter, the economic mission of the OECD results in inescapable biases on its views about education, undermining its legitimacy claims. In this perspective, international organizations originally concerned with the theme of education would be in a more legitimate stance to conduct cross-country comparisons. As a result, their analyses would be more willing to engage in contextualized discussion, rather than lead to the production of standardized templates.

The same goes for the OECD's perceived legitimacy as a neutral, disinterested party. While this view boosts the hype around PISA as an uncontested evidentiary base for education reform and policy, it is questioned by critics who see technical flaws dismissed by successful marketing (Zhao, 2020) and the organization as a conglomerate of unelected officials, with no democratic accountability, and susceptible to hidden interests (Andrews & et al., 2014).

For them, besides being prone to OECD's market-friendly biases, PISA would be vulnerable to non-negligible conflicts of interest for its reliance on partnerships with for-profit contractors that would have vested interests in selling educational improvement solutions. As such, they would cross the boundaries between framing the problems and selling their solutions in many countries participating in PISA.

This particular claim has been emphatically dismissed by the OECD, on the basis that the organization would be directly responsible for the whole PISA process, implemented under the guidance of the board of participating governments. Contracting PISA-specific technical activities, therefore, would be a limited aspect of PISA, and one which was carried out in a transparent way, following good governance practices (Schleicher, 2014). Still, as Steiner-Khamsi (2019) points out, the private sector is often better equipped to provide the policy solutions that derive from PISA. In this regard, the OECD's legitimacy might function as a force that goes hand in hand or even propel the growing specter of privatization in education.

All in all, the growth of PISA, in reach and scope, demonstrates that OECD's legitimacy in education governance is alive and well. Coupled with features of PISA, this factor helps explain PISA's current prominence around the world, despite criticism. That does not mean, however, that PISA creates automatic impacts on national policy agendas beyond the rhetorical level. In fact, the very notion that education operates in institutional-heavy environments makes room for a much more nuanced understanding about the possibilities of PISA's policy influences.

Beyond discourse: PISA'S policy impacts

PISA's visibility entails different impacts, since the reception of its results and "policy lessons" by national education systems is mediated by multiple institutional factors and domestic agendas. In this respect, a common reaction to PISA results discussed in the literature is the "Pisa shock". Germany, Denmark and Switzerland are referred as typical PISA shock examples (Niemann & Martens, 2015).

Wiseman (2013) stresses that PISA shocks tend to happen when mediocre or low performance is coupled with a deviation from general expectations on student achievement and the country's relative position on the ranking. According to them, these expectations revolve around two key meritocratic constructs – excellence and equity – which function as "legitimizing myths" of education in most countries.

In fact, the combination of these two constructs on equal grounds is not necessarily common everywhere. For emerging and low-income countries, where high levels of inequality are so blatant that they have become institutionalized, putting equity at par with excellence might already be a positive reflection of the PISA agenda. Indeed, it is worth noticing that the systematic review of published research on PISA (Hopfenbeck et al., 2018) found that the larger share of secondary analyses focused exactly on issues of inequality and, in particular, on the correlations between socioeconomic inequality and educational achievement. Equity issues have gained space in PISA reports, figuring prominently in the results of the test's post-pandemic edition.

PISA shocks might also derive from negative oscillations in performance. Japan has been pictured as an example in this

respect (Wiseman, 2013). The country faced decreases in reading literacy scores between 2000 and 2003, as well as math scores between 2003 and 2006. Even if these drops were not big and Japan still retained a relatively high overall ranking position, its previous reputation as a success story, stemming from other large-scale assessments, might help explain why PISA oscillations ended up framed as a shock.

The case of Brazil might offer some additional insights on how PISA shocks can be construed from perceptions of stagnation in the rankings. After having been showcased as a "successful reformer" to the point that it could provide "lessons" to the United States (OECD, 2011) Brazil's PISA 2018 results were released by a far-right government along with claims that education funding had increased too much in previous administrations, without having been matched by equivalent improvements in student performance, coupled with an avalanche of political blaming and shaming for what was portrayed as unacceptable achievement in comparison with neighboring countries (MEC, 2019).

This outward benchmarking perspective is indeed fostered by the comparative approach of PISA. Absolute scores seem to matter less than a country's position in relation to others, since competitiveness in the global economy is the main driver of the assessment. The US reaction to PISA give interesting insights in this regard. Niemann & Martens (2015) argue that a relative low-ranking position of the leading capitalist country did not cause great commotion until 2009, when China (or, at least, the Chinese provinces that participate in PISA) showed extraordinarily good results. PISA, in this

case, was interpreted under the bigger lens of economic hegemony.

This comparative gaze is described by the OECD as “peer pressure” and portrayed as one of the advantages of PISA to induce education improvement. According to this view, PISA shocks could be more immediately used to back politically difficult decisions or raise the costs of inaction (Schleicher, 2019). The kinds of reforms stemming from these shocks are not uniform, but they show some degree of convergence and isomorphism around three broad areas: improving teacher quality, fostering equitable education, and developing accountability systems (Wiseman, 2013). Responses across these fields vary, but the three of them represent an isomorphic construct of education quality drivers as measured by PISA.

Still, while the OECD has argued that PISA is not about quick fixes (Schleicher, 2014), the ensuing dynamics center around the notion that there are certain paths that have worked and that can produce “lessons” to be learned by other countries willing to improve performance. The loosely coupled structure of education and its ambiguous goals make the field even more prone to the embrace of “magical solutions” (Kamens, 2013): where no direct link between means and ends can be established or replicated, solutions often involve a good deal of “inspirational faith”.

As such, Kamens (2013) contends that an ever-present risk of over-relying on PISA lessons to derive policy relates to overlooking context specificities, both in the reference country where the “best practice” exists and in the destination country, where it is to be adopted. The social and cultural characteristics of high achievers such as Finland or Shanghai, for instance, are not only about schooling practices and cannot be automatically transposed. On the other

hand, imported practices that conflict with the dominant culture might be de-coupled within education systems, affecting the validity of PISA results itself. For instance, PISA response rates might be influenced by intrinsic test-taking motivations which not only vary across cultures but might also be subject to external incentives (Rivas & Scasso, 2019).

Still, the extent to which reforms allegedly derived from PISA are externally driven is debatable. Despite normative pressures, PISA has been used to legitimate reforms that, although circulating on the domestic agenda, were opposed by powerful groups. In Germany and Switzerland, for instance, Niemann & Martens (2015) argue that PISA results helped introduce assessments and accountability measures, leveraging employers perspectives and imposing discursive losses to teacher unions, no longer able to block these reforms in light of the indirect, although influential PISA power. In addition, Steiner-Khamsi (2019, p. 244) aptly describes how PISA bears the potential for a triple discursive externalization, which can be mobilized by domestic actors seeking support for self-generated reforms presented as externally-driven: first, the economy; second, projections in the form of a “concrete other”, represented by the countries that lead PISA ranks; and, as a third source of discursive mobilization, a “generalized other”, represented in the form of “best practices”. Similarly, although not focused exclusively on PISA, a study on the influence of international large-scale assessments on national education policies synthesizes the instrumentality of these external assessments for policymakers as an alluring data compact that can function as a tool to move forward or legitimize reforms, as solutions searching for problems (Fischman et al., 2019).

At any rate, despite views that PISA reinforces global accountability policies, it should be noted that PISA tests themselves are not high-stakes – at least at the school level (Rivas & Scasso, 2019). No direct sanctions or rewards can be derived from them, except at the political level. As such, PISA cannot be blamed for creating global accountability pressures for schools. Rather, it enhances the accountability push that is already taking place across different national settings, in the overall prevalent hegemony of what Kamens (2013) describes as the “audit culture”.

At country level though, PISA might be used for rushed through, narrow reforms that target rank improvements only, or that emulate best practices in a decontextualized approach. Nevertheless, a more positive use might also be envisioned. In this regard, Mehta & Peterson (2019) provide an interesting account of the potential of large-scale assessments such as PISA to foster what they conceptualize as “international learning communities”, involving policy leaders from different countries. Drawing from empirical case

studies of this type of network communities, the authors identify three kinds of learning taking place: policy borrowing, co-construction and systems thinking. Although these categories involve some degree of mimetic isomorphism, none of them could be pinned down to simplistic or coercive adoption of best practices. Systems thinking, in particular, they argue, would constitute a most valuable result of networks fostered by cross-country comparisons, as it entails a sophisticated context-driven reflection on one's own education system.

As PISA's power and influence seem nowhere near diminishing in the global education arena, striving for these rich, contextualized learning opportunities might be the best bet to ensure it produces less contested effects. Understanding how these global learning exchanges actually take place and how they can be optimized through comparisons that are culturally relevant and meaningful (Mehta & Peterson, 2019) seems a promising approach for the future of PISA.

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