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Pocket Watch – Making sense of PISA

Introduction

According to Sir Michael Barber, the PISA **survey results**, the latest of which were published last week *"focus minds in education ministries around the world like nothing else."* Certainly politicians here have not been slow to react. Michael Gove declared them a vindication of his current reform programme and a licence for more of the same: *"the tables show that nations which have the courage radically to reform their educational systems have significantly improved their performance and their children's opportunities."* The Shadow Education Secretary Tristram Hunt meanwhile labelled them *"a wake-up call,"* a phrase used by a number of others in their reactions including the CBI.

Yet not everybody buys into the PISA message. The NASUWT perhaps unsurprisingly referred to them as *"a snapshot, not the be all and end all"* while even the former High Master of St Paul's argued that they were *"media friendly but lacking credibility as an accurate assessment."*

The release of the latest PISA results has certainly become an 'occasion' on the education calendar not least because of the political collateral that comes with them but what exactly is PISA, why has it become so important and more immediately, what does it say about UK education performance and the lessons we should learn?

What is PISA?

PISA or the Programme for International Student Assessment, is a survey of educational performance of 15 years olds, those in other words coming up to the end of their formal schooling, carried out at three-yearly intervals by the OECD across member and other countries. This latest survey, which was completed in 2012, is based on results from over half a million 15 year olds across a range of participating countries, 65 in all.

Each PISA focuses on a particular knowledge area. This latest one focuses on maths with some additional assessment of reading, science and problem solving; the survey before that in 2009 majored on reading and the one before that in 2006 on science. The compilation of performance tables at such regular intervals allows for progress to be monitored and trends identified.

Students, and they represent different backgrounds and school types as far as possible, sit a 2-hour paper test comprising multiple-choice items as well as knowledge response questions. *"PISA assesses not only whether students can reproduce knowledge but whether they can extrapolate from what they have learned and apply their knowledge in new situations."* Mastery plus application in other words.

Why has PISA become so important?

Largely because international benchmarking has become an important instrument in assessing the effectiveness of education systems, and thereby the knowledge and skills of young people. PISA therefore acts as global mirror for countries, an essential resource when intellectual and skill capacity has become such an important economic commodity. As Andreas Schleicher, the OECD's Special Adviser put it, *"PISA provides a global metric of what students know and what they can do with what they know,"* essential 'intelligence' thus for national planning.

There's no doubt also as Sir Michael Barber suggested that PISA provides important data to enable countries to take stock, consider how effectively their education policies are working and what else they might need to do. There is therefore a political edge to the whole exercise as different policy approaches come under scrutiny.

Where do the latest PISA tests leave the UK?

Pretty much stuck in the middle. In the previous PISA round of 2009, UK rankings dropped considerably from 14th to 16th in science, 17th to 25th in reading and 24th to 28th in maths, provoking deep soul searching all around. That drop hasn't happened this time, there's been a fall in science from 16th to 21st but reading and maths rankings have stayed pretty constant at 23rd and 25th place respectively. Hence the use of 'stagnant' to describe the UK's performance.

But the fact remains, that the UK (there were some differences within the UK so this is based on average figures) is not in the top 20 in any of the rankings and despite all the effort at a classroom level, all the expenditure, "*the UK spends more per head on education than the average across OECD countries,*" and all the intensive reform, nothing much has changed. There were some positives, immigrant students have generally performed well compared with other countries, UK students have scored well in some core areas such as '*interpreting, applying and evaluating maths outcomes*' and we have a high proportion of top performers in science. On the down side, the performance gap remains far too wide, "*socio-economically disadvantaged students in the UK are less likely to succeed at school than their more advantaged peers,*" gender performance differences remain pronounced and "*students do not report high levels of intrinsic motivation,*" which translates into no great love of learning, a big challenge given its importance as a motivator for young people.

As to which countries have done well, as the headlines have been widely reporting it's generally been the Asian countries, Shanghai, China and Singapore that have topped most of the tables although countries like Switzerland and the Netherlands have also done well. Countries that have performed consistently well in maths in particular include: Brazil, Chile, Germany, Israel, Italy, Mexico, Poland, Portugal, Tunisia and Turkey while three of those, namely Germany, Mexico and Turkey have shown that it's possible raise the performance of their weakest students at the same time as raise performance generally, an enviable reputation.

So what should we take from all this?

The natural tendency is to look at other countries that perform consistently well and try and copy what they're doing, policy tourism as it's known. There was a whiff of this in Michael Gove's statement which outlined five '*pillars of reform to our education challenges,*' two of which, creating a more aspirational curriculum and granting head teachers more autonomy, were justified on the basis that this is what other high-performing nations do.

However, transferring what works in one country to another is not always a recipe for success and of more interest may be some of the policy implications that accompany the results in OECD's Report. These included the fact that "*nurturing top performance and tackling low performance need not be mutually exclusive,*" that more resources do not necessarily translate into better quality resources, that parental aspiration and support counts a lot as does attracting the best teachers into the classroom.

These and other features may have a touch of the common place about them but what PISA does reinforce as Sir Michael Barber outlined, is two essential truths. First the importance of valuing education and lacing that with a commitment to hard work: "*a strong cultural commitment not just to education but also to the belief that effort will be rewarded makes a big difference.*" And second, the importance of core teaching and learning: "*education leaders need to get inside the classroom and focus on the daily experience of teaching and learning. This is routinely ignored both by policy makers (who focus on inputs such as class sizes or laptops) and by teacher leaders (who argue that their members should be left alone in their classrooms to do what they want.)*"

Steve Besley

Head of Policy (UK and International)
Pearson Think Tank



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