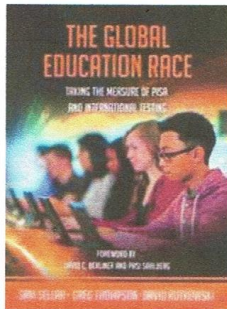


BOOK REVIEW

Running the right race

By Director of Teaching and Learning, Ms Tricia Allen

PISA is the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment. The test - in reading, mathematics and science - is given every three years to 15-year-old students from all over the world. The tests are designed to gauge students' mastery of key subjects as they relate to learning needed for adult life. In most countries, 15 is the age at which students decide whether they want to continue their education and at this point they need to be prepared for adult life. *Pymble* has participated in PISA on numerous occasions, most recently in 2018.



THE GLOBAL EDUCATION RACE: TAKING THE MEASURE OF PISA AND INTERNATIONAL TESTING

Sellar, S., Thompson, G. & Rutkowski, D. (2017). The global education race: Taking the measure of PISA and international testing. Edmonton, Canada: Brush Education.

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We have reached a point in education where the measuring and ranking of school performance has created a global race. In recent decades, there has been a growth of testing in education and this has become part of a broader trend towards 'datafication,' which essentially means assigning numbers to objects and events. In Sam Sellar, Greg Thompson, and David Rutkowski's book, *The Global Education Race: Taking the Measure of PISA and International Testing*, the authors make clear that the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Programme for Student Assessment (PISA) is "...the main track on which the global education race is run" (Sellar et al., 2017, p. 6). This global education "race" has become a metaphor which has emerged in newspaper headlines, political speeches, and think-tank reports. It suggests that schooling has now become a global competition in which each country strives to surpass

another in terms of educational performance and that countries now worry about being left behind.

The book aims to provide an introduction to PISA, to highlight how it works both in technical and political terms, and to argue for a broader debate in the ability to meaningfully assign numbers to education, the rationality of data (mis)use, and the negative consequences of data.

What sets this book apart from other examinations of PISA is the target audience. Written to make the information accessible to all stakeholders, including educators, parents and teachers, it aims to examine how PISA shapes educational thinking and to challenge the myths about the performance comparison of school systems that have emerged as a result of PISA. In short, it aims to help people understand "...what PISA is, what it does, and what it cannot do" (Sellar et al., 2017, p. 7).

The book is not anti-testing nor anti-PISA, rather, it looks at the potential usefulness of PISA beyond national scores and rankings. It does not offer any simple solutions to the complex nature of educational reform. The authors stress the usefulness of PISA as a place to start a conversation about what the data can reveal, rather than a report card on the success of educational systems.

The early chapters focus on the myths surrounding media coverage of PISA data, with particular emphasis on rankings. The authors refer to the OECD explanation "that less than 1% of its PISA report focuses on league

tables, a much higher percentage of the media reporting does focus on these tables" (Sellar et al., 2017, p. 18). According to an Education International publication "the impact of PISA through the media is undeniable" (Education International, 2007, paragraph 12). The problem arises when these results get amplified through the media where simplistic stories about crises and decline become detached from the basis of evidence itself and then get used to justify particular policies or reform. This was the case in the 2013 Australian

Education Act, where one of the objects of this Act was for "Australia to be placed, by 2025, in the top 5 highest performing countries based on the performance of school students in reading, mathematics and science" (Australian Education Act, 2013, p. 3). This is a non-sensical goal

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GLOBAL CONTEXT

because the point is not about where you rank in PISA but what Australia might learn from the data as a useful tool in context, and for particular purposes.

The focus then shifts to the administration and technical aspects of the test followed by the problems with comparisons and correlations between countries. The authors then consider the validity of standardised testing and the politics of educational measurement. What must be noted is that PISA does not aim to measure how well students have learnt what is taught in schools. It is an assessment that measures what a 15-year-old knows on a given day about the content that the OECD thinks is important in terms of economic growth. In making clear some of the limitations and difficulties with PISA, the authors hope to reduce some of the pressure put on education ministers by the assessment, highlighting that rank does not correlate with performance and that hasty conclusions in relation to policy reform should be avoided. What is limiting in the book is the discussion around equity in PISA and the correlation of the questionnaire results with the assessment. This is a key point which links clearly with policy significance. Whilst this issue is mentioned briefly as a policy outcome, according to Mortimore,

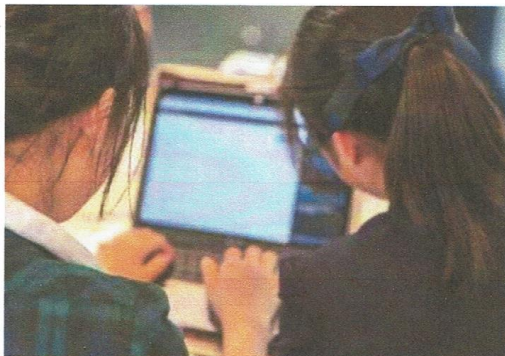
“ This global education “race” ... suggests that schooling has now become a global competition in which each country aims to surpass another in terms of educational performance and that countries now worry about being left behind.”

“socio-economic backgrounds and school and educational system characteristics can add to our knowledge about how schools and school systems can promote achievement and increase the equity of educational outcomes” (Mortimore, 2009, p. 3). The authors might well have looked at the significance of equity in this context rather than solely in terms of policy outcomes. Although limiting, this is rather minor given the ultimate aims of the book.

The message given in *The Global Education Race* on questioning the validity of messages disseminated through the media, should also be transferred to other measures of data, encouraging consumers to raise the standard of the debate about these assessments, rejecting invalid, simplistic stories. PISA does give a set of data that can be used as part of an international conversation about education and its purposes. If seen in this light, having a robust data set is useful.

The Global Education Race encourages informed, critical engagement with PISA and its implications. It equips the reader with the knowledge to question what is presented through media outlets. This consideration can help shape effective policy through informed, public pressure. There are right and wrong ways to use the data. This book makes it easier to navigate this race. What matters most is that countries are running in the right direction, in the right race, for the right reasons, rather than being at the top of the rankings.

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PISA data from online testing can start a conversation about school reform

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