

## THE IMPACT OF PISA: UNDERSTANDING GLOBAL EDUCATION TRENDS

***Sabirova Nasiba Ergashevna***

*Head of the Department of Language Teaching Methods of the Khorezm*

*Regional Pedagogical Skills Center, Doctor of Philology (DSc), Professor*

***Mahsudbekov Muhammad Murodbek ugli***

*(student of the Presidential School in Khiva)*

**Annotation:** "The Impact of PISA: Understanding Global Education Trends" explores how the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) has reshaped educational systems around the world. It examines how PISA's standardized testing has influenced education policy, teaching methods, and curriculum development in participating countries. The article also discusses the criticisms of PISA, including concerns about test-driven learning and cultural bias, while highlighting how global benchmarking has sparked both reforms and debates in education. Through comparative data analysis, the piece sheds light on best practices and the complexities of assessing education quality across diverse contexts.

**Key Words:** PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), Global education, Educational policy, Standardized testing, Student performance, Benchmarking, Curriculum reform, International comparison, Educational equity, Test-driven learning, OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development).

If student engagement is suffering as a result, it's perhaps not surprising given that teaching to the test and to meet externally imposed accountability targets are not exactly conducive to engaging students daily in their classrooms, undermining both the joy of reading and the joy of teaching reading. Teachers are in many ways caught between a rock and a hard educational place – some might say these external forces are squeezing the human element out of teaching and learning, a serious concern if one believes that fostering caring supportive relationships with students is what lies at the heart of successful teaching.

Some groups such as Aboriginal students are especially vulnerable to these forces. In a recent CTF study exploring the professional experiences and knowledge of Aboriginal teachers in Canadian public schools, Verna St. Denis discusses the impact of market-driven educational reform on Aboriginal teachers' capacity to form meaningful caring relationships with their students and to generally improve the poor quality of education for Aboriginal children:

The [Aboriginal] participants in this study became teachers and remained in the teaching profession because the ethical and moral dimensions of teaching motivated them. But these dimensions can be undermined in a climate of market-driven education policies and practices that are increasingly present in educational systems. St. Denis notes that her research is consistent with other studies that have found that the moral and ethical dimensions of teaching

need attention, and that teachers' morale is an important factor in effective teaching, one that appears to have been marginalized in an educational climate that defines success in terms of test scores. As the title of Joel Westheimer's lecture at the 2009 CEA Whitworth Forum strongly suggests – "No child left thinking: Testing, 'accountability', and the threat to Canadian democracy" – the accountability stakes are also very high for schools in terms of the implications for teaching critical thinking and citizenship education, and ultimately for democracy. Westheimer (2008) is critical of the general thrust of education reforms in Canada, noting that "in many boards and provinces, ever more narrow curriculum frameworks emphasize preparing students for standardized assessments in math and literacy at the same time that they shortchange the social studies, history, and citizenship education. ...Curricular approaches that spoonfeed students to succeed on narrow academic tests teach students that broader critical thinking is optional."

The OECD – education indicators & international surveys A major proponent of this vision of education as provider of human capital for the globalized economy is the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). In a critique of the OECD education indicators project written a decade ago, Kuehn describes the lens through which this powerful organization views and interprets education:

A central assumption behind the OECD view of education is to consider students as "human capital." The perspective logically follows from a conception of the role of government as primarily fostering economic growth, with culture and society also seen as subordinate to the economy. When economic objectives become central, then the value of education is measured primarily by its contribution to economic growth (Spring, 1998). The OECD's education indicator systems are largely focused on elements of education that are seen as developing "human capital" and thus making a contribution to economic growth.

This is as true now as it was a decade ago, and perhaps even more so in the wake of the global economic and financial crisis. The thrust of the 2009 Education at a Glance report revolves around the need to invest in education to beat the recession.

PISA is an international standardized test administered to random samples of 15-year-old students in all 30 OECD member countries as well as a growing number of OECD partner countries. It is not designed on the basis of national curricula and programmes but rather, "PISA assesses the extent to which 15-yrs-old students near the end of compulsory education possess the key knowledge and skills [in the areas of science, reading and mathematics] for their full participation in society."

(Figazzolo, 2009, p. 3)

To date there have been four cycles of PISA:

PISA 2000 – 43 countries participated in the assessment; subject focus was  
reading (primary assessment domain)

PISA 2003 – 41 countries participated; focus on mathematics

PISA 2006 – 57 countries involving approx. 400,000 students; focus on science

PISA 2009 – 65 countries are participating; focus on reading

Key features of PISA according to the OECD (p. 7) include:

- its policy orientation, with design and reporting methods determined by the need of governments to draw policy lessons.
- its contextualization within the system of OECD education indicators, which examine the quality of learning outcomes, the policy levers and contextual factors that shape these outcomes, and the broader private and social returns to investments in education.
- its breadth of geographical coverage and collaborative nature, with more than 60 countries (covering roughly nine-tenths of the world economy) having participated in PISA assessments to date, including all 30 OECD countries.
- its regularity, which will enable countries to monitor their progress in meeting key learning objectives.

These combined features of PISA – policy orientation, contextualization within the OECD education indicators, and the breadth and regularity of testing – make PISA a powerful instrument for shaping education policy among OECD countries and beyond.

### **Conclusion:**

PISA has become a powerful tool in shaping global education by providing data that allows countries to benchmark their students' performance internationally. While it has led to important reforms and greater awareness of educational strengths and weaknesses, it also raises questions about over-reliance on standardized testing and the risk of narrowing educational goals. Moving forward, a balanced approach is necessary—one that leverages PISA insights without compromising the broader purpose of education.

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