

# PISA, POLICY AND KNOWLEDGE IN EDUCATION

PRESENTATION

## About the theme and the purpose of the Dossier

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) was officially launched in late 1990s, from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), as a response to the associated countries' need, on a regular basis, of reliable data on the skills of their students and on the performance of educational systems. Currently, about fifteen years after the first 'cycle' (in 2000), and after five other 'cycles' (2003, 2006, 2009, 2012, 2015), PISA continues with its intentions to create knowledge for policy, that is, a type of knowledge build from the disciplined involvement of experts and politicians, under the OECD supervision, to assist the development of policies and to provide policy makers with tools (conceptual frameworks, data, benchmarks) for their own guidance.

If the continuity along the last fifteen years shows the success of the "PISA" proposal, no less significant are the quantitative increase of countries involved, and the extent of the geopolitical coverage achieved by this large scale international assessment: in 2000, 43 countries took part in it (13 of which are not members of the OECD); in 2012, there were 65 participant countries (31 of which are not members of the OECD); in 2015, date of the last assessment, the main results of which will be published in the last quarter of the year, the number of participating countries should exceed 70. Among these is Brazil, which has been tacking part of the program since its first survey: recently, according to the data from the National Institute of Educational Studies and Research (*Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais* — INEP), an entity responsible for PISA administration in the country, about 33 thousand students, aged 15 years (as determined by the program's protocol), associated to 965 schools from all Brazilian states, were selected to take part in the assessment of 2015 which focused on literacy skills in Science.

As much as or more important than the quantitative expression of the adhesion of national governments is the fact that, despite the cultural

specificities of the contexts through which the data and analysis generated in PISA circulate, their results have been, recurrently, raising interpretations on educational problems and on the appropriate ways to deal with them. Moreover, in addition to legitimizing the mobilization of data and analysis and to promoting debates on national contexts policies, it is known that many products associated to the acronym are being used for other purposes in many different contexts: the adoption in many countries of performance goals referred to by PISA; the use of PISA data and methods in the making of secondary analysis; the conception or the review of national evaluation tools in the light of the PISA matrix.

The differences observed in modalities and effects of the mobilization of PISA's texts and products, in different cultural and political contexts, should be understood as signs of the attractiveness exercised and achieved by this large-scale international assessment. In fact, PISA success is achieved by the participation of actors from various social worlds (politicians, investigators, administrators, experts, teacher trainers) in the production, dissemination, and use of PISA products. In other words, its strength as a policy-knowledge instrument lies in effectively generated interdependencies, both in and with those worlds, regarding the inquiry, exchange and publication activities made under the PISA label.

Due to this wide and varied set of characteristics, PISA figures as an undeniable participant in policy processes and public action in education; consequently, it becomes a relevant matter for the educational research. Thus, this dossier aims to document and analyze how PISA is inducing, participating and being used in the "make and remake" of educational problems and solutions. This analysis is crucial in order to develop understanding on various contemporary phenomena, namely the role of knowledge — especially the knowledge claiming expert statute — in the coordination of educational policies; the new "regulatory" processes in education, transnationally and nationally, based on information and persuasion rather than command and control. In addition, the dossier aims to foster the reflexion and debate on the consequences of these new regulatory processes for the construction and legitimation of educational knowledge in our societies.

To this end, the Dossier consists of a varied set of re-readings of the self-proclaimed "quality-monitoring instrument." Sharing a critical and analytical desideratum, the papers have distinct themes and focuses, as well as distinct disciplinary starting points and theoretical references (gathering contributions from political sociology of education, study of sciences and technology, history of education, among others). Thus, the dossier expresses the multiplicity of the approaches which, throughout the last decade, have been activated by numerous researchers and networks of researchers in order to understand the way PISA pres-

ents problems and offers solutions for the functioning of the educational systems, justifies agendas for educational policies and for the relations between knowledge and politics in contemporary societies.

In fact, the authors involved in this thematic issue are or have recently been involved in research projects and research networks focused on large scale international assessments, some specifically about PISA, and have fairly regularly published about this subject, mainly, and in some cases exclusively, in English. Consequently, through this Dossier, the *Education & Society* journal (*Educação & Sociedade*) puts into circulation and debates, in Portuguese, a set of studies (some empirical, others of essayistic nature) generated under various international spaces of educational and social research about the international assessments and their relations with education and knowledge policies and politics.

## About the articles

The three first articles of the Dossier describe and analyze various rationalities — about education, the government of education, and the production of educational knowledge —, which are present in documents elaborated under the auspices of OECD/PISA and/or appropriations of those made in different public spaces: policy-making, administration of education, mass media, and social research.

The first paper examines several guiding logics of action in the context of PISA: the logic spread and managed by the OECD in their mass communication actions, with regard to the qualities of the program; the logics that, at a national scenario, justify the governmental participation in the program. The paper complements the analysis of the cognitive and normative dimensions of PISA with the elucidation of the ways by which national political actors are using PISA results to legitimize their reform efforts. Three cases illustrate the analysis: United States, England, and Australia). Bob Lingard (University of Queensland, Australia), drawing on his extended research on the OECD (and especially about PISA), places the reader before two particularly important political facets of PISA. On the one hand, he shows the OECD interventions which support the construction and crystallization of PISA's social relevance and the trust deposited on it as a product of expert knowledge. From these interventions results, as he states, “the constitution of the world as a commensurate space of measurement.” On the other hand, Lingard' descriptions and analysis of the processes which occur in each national context, at the downstream of the triennial disclosure of PISA data, make it clear that resorting to PISA tends to work rather to the purpose of affirmation of previously established policy solutions than to the expected purposes of policy learning.

The second article focuses the attention of the reader in the narratives about teachers and teaching developed in five main international reports on PISA data, elaborated under the supervision of the OECD. Christina Mølstad (Hedmark University of Applied Sciences, Norway) and Daniel Pettersson (University of Gävle, Sweden) show, with detail and using some examples related to Brazil, that PISA creates and shapes the way of thinking, talking, and acting in education. They do so through the description of three narratives that associate the conducts of teachers to the variation of student performances in PISA: the ‘enlightened’ teacher (informed about the facts and knowledge generated from PISA, so that the performances of students might be improved); the ‘transformational’ teacher (creator and executor of strategies that make students “move forward”); the ‘reformable’ teacher (aligned with the PISA “truths” about the performance of students and about the improvements needed in education). The authors make it rather clear that the narratives always articulate (i) a definition of ‘good’ education — the one which lead to the improvement of students’ performances in PISA — with (ii) a representation which gives meaning to teachers’ work — the representation of teachers as central agents of change. As is also shown, such statute places teachers in a paradoxal condition: on the one hand, they may claim more support from policy makers; on the other hand, they easily became targets of blame. In either one condition the “knowledge” generated by PISA is reinforced, as it is made instrumental by any of the arguments.

It is not only the actors of the OECD and their experts, or the politicians or the mass media who mobilize, for their course of actions, the data generated by and stored in PISA. This practice is also relevant in the world of research, by the many types of texts: explanations of the results; methodological or conceptual controversies; analysis on the impact of PISA results on national policies; secondary analysis of PISA data. It is on this last form of mobilization that the third article of the Dossier focuses on: the rationality that governs the production of the secondary analysis of PISA data. Assuming at first the essayistic style, and relying either on contributions of the Science and Technology Studies (especially the actor-network theory), or on materials of her researches (among which thirty interviews with specialists and experts), Radhika Gorur (Deakin University, Australia) questions the ontological statute of the objects visualized — and the databases created — by PISA and, in a more detailed way, she critically analyze the descriptions of the facts generated by the secondary analysis made upon those. The essay gives the reader an opportunity to reflect on the limitations and constraints that the whole socio-technical device created by PISA (and ‘extended’ by the secondary analysis) imposes for the understanding of the educational realities and, even, for the production of an alternative knowledge on educational reality (able to represent its complexity, without abandoning the contextualized nature of the social phenomenon).

The two following articles focus on the intervention of the OECD in the processes of transnational governance in education. And in both cases greater attention is given to the social dimensions of the construction of the credibility and the attractiveness of the international comparative assessment generated under OECD supervision.

The fourth article in the Dossier approaches the OECDs' intervention within PISA as an analyzer of transnational governance. Luís Miguel Carvalho (University of Lisbon, Portugal) starts by introducing the processes and effects of the dynamics of transnational regulation which occur in the context of PISA. Regarding the processes, he shows that the influence of this knowledge-policy instrument manifests itself in the realm of ideas and also in the context of organized action. Regarding the effects, he shows that PISA regulatory power is concretized in the variety of uses that initiates in contexts inhabited by different interests and beliefs. In the second part of the article, the author addresses three manifestations of the intensification and sophistication of the transnational regulatory processes in the context of PISA: the dissemination of knowledge; the exchange of knowledge; the production of knowledge. When doing so, he also tries to point out new and promising paths for the research on PISA. They are, for now, trails for research, so far explored in few studies. However, they seem to have great potential, either for further understanding of the processes of transnational regulation, or either to know PISA in all its complexity, following its developments in new processes and products.

The fifth paper looks into one of these developments of PISA; a development that, concomitantly, enlarges the political scope of the compared international assessment generated under the impulse and coordination of the OECD. Specifically, the paper examines "PISA for Development," a program meant for countries with low and medium incomes, part of which are located in the South American space. The paper by Camilla Addey (Humboldt University, Germany) approaches the political agenda and the political value of this new OECD program, as well as the involvement of the company responsible for the technical development of the program and, also, the logic of participation manifested in the participant countries, particularly Ecuador and Paraguay. Based on documental analysis, in observations of meeting and in interviews carried out in the course of a research which followed up the development and implementation of the new program, the author describes and analyzes the construction of the agreement which supports the conviction about the political relevance of "PISA for Development", shared by the OECD, the company and the national policy actors. This analytical exercise allows her to demonstrate that such process results in the adhesion or aggregation of more actors to the "epistemic community" of PISA — and to the knowledge for policy produced and legitimated by the community —, provided that the divergent political interests they bear are respected.

The last two papers lead the reader away from the strict universe of the production, circulation, and appropriation of PISA products. Each of the texts inscribe the analysis of PISA in a broader comprehensive effort which encompasses phenomena and processes of larger scale and/or greater historical thickness: in one case, the fabrication of an European educational space and, by extension, their contribution for the construction of the European Union; in the other case, the ways of governing and administrating large populations from the populational thought and statistical reason.

The sixth article of the Dossier examines the governance processes of education in the European space, with special attention to the development of policy convergence between the Directorate General for Education and Culture of the European Commission (DG EAC) and the OECD. Such development is strongly supported in the constitution and use of data and numbers, among which the ones generated by PISA are especially important, as the main mechanisms of creation of meanings on a European education. Sotiria Grek (University of Edinburgh, Scotland), in the continuation of her previous works on Europeanization of education, and drawing on materials from three international studies in which she took part leads the reader in late 1990s, when the “governing by numbers” emerged as a persuasive modality for the steering of educational affairs in Europe; and from the late to the present, when the consolidation of performance monitoring (of which the PISA is an excellent example) is so clear as the way to organize the political space and the policies. It is noteworthy in the analysis that throughout the past 15 years of DG EAC and the OECD — agencies which operate by means of production, storage, control, and dissemination of knowledge, and not by law or formal regulation — consolidate themselves, in partnership, as “calculation centers” in a complex process of governing without government, in which the technicisation of the politics and policies stands out.

The Dossier concludes with a paper on the historical constitution of statistical reasoning as an appropriate and reasonable way to think policies and politics and to produce knowledge. The text examines how numbers achieved a privileged status in telling the truth about the individual and collective life; and the consequences of this phenomenon for the government of education. Therefore, PISA (along with other large scale international assessments) is questioned along the paper in the context of the sociological and historical *problématique* of the “system of reason” which organize the production and legitimation of knowledge and truth in education. Tom Popkewitz (University of Wisconsin-Madison, United States) and Sverker Lindblad (University of Gothenburg, Sweden) lead the reader into another level of comprehension of the cultural and political dimensions of PISA: a comprehension that, as they write, does not wish to discuss the benignity nor the usefulness of the statistics, but to make significant the “cultural practices” implied in the administration of populations in modern societies as “a

particular way of reasoning in the governing of modern societies. Downstream, the authors show how this kind of administration of the social “fabricates” (materially and fictionally) “particular types of people,” with expected repertoires, profiles and life trajectories, which could be administered by schooling.

The collection of works gathered in this Dossier, despite its variety as for their starting points and analytical lenses, challenges the reader to ponder and to combine multiple dimensions which necessarily have to be considered in order to understand (both analytically and critically) PISA as an instrument that participates in the contemporary “regulatory” process of education — the cognitive and the social; the institutional and the strategical; the transnational and the national; and the political and epistemological.

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