

PISA Pros and Cons....

Working paper

To be completed

Antoine Bodin – August 2015

The following text concerns mainly PISA but most of the comments would be similar for other international studies (TIMSS, PIRLS, PIACC, ALL) and even some national studies.

This is a provisional paper that needs to be completed and more documented.

Hundreds of academics papers have been issued since 2000 (year of the first PISA study), which come after similar papers issued since the first international study (FIMS -1964)

Most of these texts bear negative criticism of PISA. This is not surprising since it is not customary to write academic research papers to applaud Governmental initiatives. However, these papers contain many criticisms and comments that could help to make judicious use of the PISA results.

Unfortunately those who use PISA (governmental agencies) and those who publicise the results to a wide audience (the media) often do not understand much about the overall design of PISA (which is indeed not easy to understand).

	Some Cons	Some Pros	Remarks
Ideology and politics			
1	<p>PISA has been designed to help uniformizing the world educational systems and to put them at the service of the global economy as it is now.</p> <p>A critic says Pisa is the Trojan Horse of the globalisation.</p> <p><i>(Fred Naylor, Educational Consultant, UK, in "Current Concerns" n°1/2004)</i></p>	<p>Peace and development in the world suppose good educational systems.</p> <p>Evidence-based comparisons between countries, benchmarking and incitement to adapt what would be recognized as efficient curriculums are good means to achieve this goal.</p>	<p>The main negative criticism addressed to PISA is of ideological nature.</p> <p>What is sure is that PISA has been organised by the OECD, which, as everyone knows, is the "Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development". The OECD doesn't care directly to education but to economy. Right or wrong, the OECD assumes that Education is the main key for development and acts accordingly.</p>
2	<p>PISA tends to impose all around the world a model of curriculum decided between occidental developed countries. This model, questionably good for these countries, may be totally inappropriate for others countries.</p>	<p>PISA is an international consortium that gathers thousands of scholars and stakeholders from more than 60 countries to analyse the educational needs for our time. Its framework reflects a deep and documented reflexion.</p> <p>PISA makes regular surveys (one each 3 years) to assess</p>	<p>Here again the "Cons" is of ideological and political nature.</p>

		15 year-olds students from 70 countries. Without imposing anything, It provides indicators that are very useful for educational management in any country.	
	<p>In my opinion, these two first critics are the main ones. They are partially founded. Meanwhile, a pragmatic approach of the question should lead to relativize them.</p> <p>The other critics presented below are also more or less partially founded, but they seem often put forward to avoid ideological debates:</p>		
Validity and reliability of the assessments			
3	While PISA claims to assess competencies needed in real life, the PISA items are most often “false concrete” problems that can’t pretend to anticipate what will be meet in real life.	PISA tries to approach authentic assessment and assessment in real and concrete situations. It is only an approach but extensions of the PISA studies take this issue seriously.	As a fact, all people interested in real life assessment know how that is difficult. In an artificial setting as in PISA, only a broad approach is possible: On the opposite, authentic setting, when possible, can’t cover the whole we want to assess and demand much time and resources.
4	<p>At most “PISA assesses with some degree of reliability, knowledge and skills for PISA. No more, no less.”</p> <p><i>(Nina Bonderup Dohn - Knowledge and Skills for PISA—Assessing the Assessment - Journal of Philosophy of Education, Vol. 41, No. 1, 2007)</i></p>	<p>There is an old judgment from Henry Pieron (psychological test inventor): "intelligence is what is measured by the tests". That hasn't prevented to make good use (and bad use) of psychological tests.</p> <p>Here we can say that competencies are what are measured by the PISA tests. So, we need to relativize the relevance of using the word "measure" in this case and try to get the best of the information we get by PISA.</p> <p>PISA provides us pictures taken from a certain point of view and any picture calls for interpretation.</p>	
	<p>The huge poverty of the coding grids prevents any kind of analyse of answering processes.</p> <p>“PISA relies on ‘strong assumptions’ based on weak data”</p>	That is a reasonable compromise. Any country is incited to conduct complementary studies.	

	<p>Numerous cultural biases have been identified (which indeed are different across countries). That limits both the validity and the reliability of the results.</p> <p>Of course, there are also biases about gender and ethnicity of students.</p> <p>See for example: Joachim Wuttke: <i>Uncertainties and Bias in PISA In Pisa According to Pisa. Lit Verlag 2007</i></p>	<p>Various biases are inevitable in any statistical study requiring a large quantity of data. Here again precautions are needed to avoid confusing between indicators and measures [moreover, any measure is tainted with uncertainty).</p>	
	<p>PISA surveys (as well as TIMSS, PIRLS and others) are largely based on psychometrical methods that are not much compatible with any thinking and knowledge about didactics.</p>	<p>PISA tries to work around this problem by giving less and less importance in the ranking and in the main scale. PISA produces qualitative side studies that don't deserve this criticism.</p>	
	<p>Many bias in the data are well documented. They limit both the validity and the reliability of the results.</p>		
Use and usefulness of the PISA results			
	<p>The PISA tests cover only a small part of the expected learning outcomes of any educational system. Consequently, the inferences made from the PISA results are largely unfounded.</p>	<p>PISA assumes that it is aimed to assess against a framework that can be challenged.</p> <p>Any country is incited to use PISA along with complementary national studies.</p>	
<p>Clearly, after the ideological criticisms, the main criticisms concern the way the media inform the public and the ways the politics made use of the results: The media have often a poor understanding of PISA while politicians tend just ta take into account what can serve their agenda: That is not just the fault of PISA.</p>			