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This article was written as the editorial for a Compare Forum titled 'The power and politics of international comparisons'.

## The Power and Politics of International Comparisons

### Editorial

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#### Introduction

The power and influence of international comparisons of educational achievement, most especially the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), sharply divides opinion amongst researchers, politicians and public commentators. It is arguably the most controversial and high profile of debates to which we, as researchers in international and comparative education, have a responsibility to contribute. This Compare Forum is based upon a Round Table Opening Plenary held at the 2014 BAICE Conference on the theme of Power, Politics and Priorities at the University of Bath in September 2014. The Forum discussion brings together six contributors, who are all actively involved in research relating to the nature, impact and implications of international comparisons for education. Collectively, their contributions add significantly to ongoing debate by examining the implications of international comparisons for global economic competition; for national policy making; and for global governance of education.

#### The Global Reach and Impact of International Comparisons

The findings of international comparisons are gaining increasing prominence in the discourse of politicians and the popular media. This is particularly true for PISA, which tests 15 year olds across 66 economies, evaluates education systems and has been described in popular media as the 'the world's most important exam' (Coughlan, 2013). In the UK, the PISA 2012 scores had politicians from the left and right looking to Shanghai and Hong Kong, the top scorers, for policy lessons. They also generated searching questions about the lower scores for Wales compared to the rest of UK. Other Western nations have also been looking East although the consistently high performance of Finland has attracted global attention over a number of years.

Whilst some commentators recognise the over-simplicity of country rankings, nonetheless they have been repeatedly deployed within a discourse of global economic competitiveness and skills. On the other hand, analyses of data from international comparisons, for example within the Education for All Global Monitoring Reports, have highlighted inequality in educational achievement between and

within countries as an urgent development issue. A strong relationship has been revealed between scores and indicators of economic wealth at the national level, as well as within-country inequalities between different groups and geographical regions. Such work has influenced debates about post-2015 goals for education, contributing to a consensus that learning targets should form a part of a future goal (see Rose's contribution). Cognisant of these debates, the OECD appears to be positioning itself to play a key role in the global monitoring of learning achievement worldwide through its 'PISA for development' project, discussed by Bloem in this Forum. These and related developments draw attention to the power and politics of international comparisons –and to the urgent need for comparative and international researchers to engage with the policy debate they generate.

### **The Forum Contributions**

In the first of our six contributions, Morris focuses on the growth of international research that compares between education systems with the purpose of setting benchmarks and identifying 'best practice'. He interrogates the underpinning logic of these studies that constructs a direct causal chain between school systems and national competitiveness within the global economy. His argument is illustrated through a critique of the way UK policy makers have discursively deployed PISA results, particularly the success of some East Asian countries, to justify policy changes that bear little or no relation to the policies actually pursued in those countries. Next, Chung looks to the example of Finland, a country that has consistently performed well in PISA. She argues that Finnish success derives from a long term planning approach that contrasts with UK's 'quick fix' policy reactions. She urges comparative researchers to engage with policy makers over the interpretation of international comparisons. She offers the example of a Working Group doing just that, with which three of the Forum contributors are involved. Grek looks at Europe more widely and the influence the OECD has purchased over educational governance through the authority invested in PISA, which policy makers assume offers an 'objective' measurement of systems. She analyzes this move as a 'historical moment', situating it as part of a trend towards intensification in the 'surveillance of national education systems through indicators and benchmarking'.

The next two contributions are concerned with the extension of this kind of measurement technology to low and middle income countries. Bloem considers how the motivations for low and middle income countries to participate in PISA can diverge from those of the OECD countries, for which it was originally designed. She focuses on questions of capacity to analyze findings, to participate in survey development, to implement the tests in country and to afford the considerable financial cost of participation. She argues that these capacity questions compromise the benefits of participation in PISA countries, proposing them as priority issues for international and comparative research. Rose relates this debate directly to the emerging post-2015 development agenda. Whilst asserting the need to track progress in learning internationally, she disputes that this requires a new 'global system of international large-scale assessment'. She points out that, whilst there is always scope to improve the quality and consistency of data available, existing cross-national surveys and national assessments have already provided sufficient data to enable the Education for All Global Monitoring Report to draw attention to the international learning crisis.

Lauder's concluding piece takes us back to the overarching logic of human capital theory, first highlighted by Morris, so often used to justify investment in and policy reactions to cross-national

assessments of learning (as argued in Morris, Chung and Grek's contributions). Lauder questions the validity of human capital theory in the context of a global labour market that works to benefit transnational companies. Rather than engaging in an international race to provide transnational companies with comparatively cheap highly skilled labour, Lauder argues that nation states should be investing in well-educated civil servants, who can steer industrial and economic policies to the benefit of citizens.

## Conclusion

High profile international comparisons of education systems, especially PISA but also reports, such as the Mourshed et al. (2010) published by McKinsey and the Learning Curve programme or research commissioned by Pearson, are attracting the attention of politicians and policy-makers to comparative and international education (Gove, 2011). Paradoxically, however, these well known comparative reports have attracted sustained critical attention from academic comparativists (e.g. Ozga et al., 2011; Meyer and Benavot, 2013), amongst them the six authors contributing to this Forum. The various contributions to this forum have argued the need to continue with policy analysis that interrogates the assumptions and effects of interpretations of cross-national comparisons and for technical research probing the limitations to their objectivity. However, the power, potential and strategic impact of such research depends on sustained engagement between academic researchers and policy makers.

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