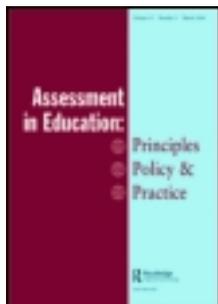


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### PISA, power and policy

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## BOOK REVIEW

**PISA, power and policy**, by Heinz-Dieter Meyer and Aaron Benavot, Didcot, Symposium Books, 2013, 336 pp., \$56 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-873927-96-0

*PISA, Power and Policy* is an interesting and important addition to the growing literature on large-scale international assessments. The volume explores a number of aspects of such tests, although the focus is the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study and the ever increasing role of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in the field of education. Through a mixture of quantitative and qualitative studies, *PISA, Power and Policy* covers a vast array of topics, ranging from the inevitable discussion of what drives the educational success of Finland and the high-performing East Asian jurisdictions to the role of the OECD in the Cold War. This is both to the credit and the detriment of the volume as a whole; because a great deal of material is covered, the central message of the book is occasionally lost.

Meyer and Benavot, the volume editors, make clear their position on PISA from the start; they are unashamed critics who are sceptical of its ability to inform educational policy. Indeed, in the introduction (p. 9), they state that the explicit aim of the volume is to ‘problematize’ the OECD’s role as ‘diagnostician, judge and policy advisor to the world’s school system’ and to ‘question PISA as an institution building force in global education’. This will no doubt delight sceptics of the OECD PISA project and of international testing regimes in general (who are clearly the intended readership of the book). However, to individuals who are looking for an unbiased and enlightening insight into issues surrounding educational testing, this antagonistic agenda is disappointing. Consequently, although the volume does make some progress towards reaching the editors’ goal, the interesting substantive arguments made by various chapter authors are somewhat undermined by what comes across as a pre-meditated (and sometimes disjointed) attack on the PISA project.

Although it would be easy to dismiss this whole volume because of this openly stated agenda, there are many reasons why perspective readers should not do so. The first is that the book covers a number of issues in an interesting and articulate way, many of which are worthy of further consideration. As with all edited volumes, the quality and interest of individual chapters fluctuates from adding relatively little to serious academic and policy debate through to some chapters that are ‘must-reads’. Particular chapters worthy of mention include Chapter 9 by Meyer and Schiller on the role of non-educational effects in large-scale assessments and Chapter 11 by Dronkers and De Hus regarding the link between immigration and children’s educational performance. Together, these chapters illustrate what academics, policy-makers and practitioners should understand about large-scale international assessments; although PISA cannot answer all of our questions about the educational performance of a country’s educational system, it can still provide interesting and informative

insights. Indeed, if there is one message for policy-makers to take from the book, it is the statement made by Meyer and Schiller in the abstract for Chapter 9: 'A country's position on the global PISA ranking provides very little information about the quality of its schools'.

However, the strengths of this book must also be viewed in the context of its limitations. One difficulty is that the volume contains a mixture of quantitative and qualitative studies, which do not always complement each other well. The chapters also provide conflicting messages; for instance Chapter 9 discusses the importance of non-educational factors for PISA outcomes, but Chapter 10 then focuses upon the high-performing East Asian countries, arguing that learning strategies and school disciplinary climate are one of the key reasons for their success. However, perhaps the greater limitation is that, in places, the volume falls into one of the traps that it is trying to argue against. One of the biggest criticisms of PISA, both within this volume and more generally, is that claims are often made beyond the evidence it provides. But, at various points, articles in the volume are verging on being guilty of similar practice. An example is Chapter 4 (p. 102), where Andrews discusses differences in test scores between Finnish-speaking Finns and Swedish-speaking Finns, despite the small sample size of the latter and the lack of evidence presented on statistical significance. Likewise, in Chapter 10, Ma, Jong and Yuan claim that 'although ... many East Asian students are under greater pressure to achieve, we confidently suspect that many of them have also found an effective way to cope with this pressure' – a statement for which little solid empirical evidence is presented. Unfortunately, being found guilty of one of the things the book is arguing against (the over-interpretation of PISA results) blunts many of the interesting messages a number of the chapter authors are trying to put across.

Overall, although *PISA, Power and Policy* isn't a 'must read', it does contain a number of worthwhile articles that are interesting and insightful in their own right. It is a useful contribution to academics and policy-makers who are trying to understand more about PISA, the context behind the study and its development, and how one should interpret certain countries' impressive results (particularly Finland, Flanders and a number of jurisdictions in East Asia). At the same time, as the volume has been set up with the explicit aim of 'problematizing' PISA, readers should take some of the bolder claims being made with a pinch of salt.

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