

From Yardstick to Hegemony

How the OECD uses PISA to enforce a new concept of education

Not only do the PISA studies and their results determine how future generations are educated but one yardstick *alone* measures and evaluates the abilities and skills – in newspeak competencies – of students from over 30 countries. In the year 2000 the German PISA Consortium openly acknowledged that its standard of measurement does not take into account the educational traditions, constitutions or policies of the countries under assessment. Rather, its ratings are based on an original concept with normative influence:¹ Teachers, schools and entire educational systems are being subjected to a single system of testing, the criteria of which alone determine their excellence. Therefore, in view of the immense media attention given to PISA's publication of its testing results, it appears pertinent to ask the following questions: What exactly are the criteria informing these assessments? And who has the power to determine their „validity“?

These questions point directly to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) which – as initiator of the PISA assessment process – has since the 1960s and on its own account “become central, providing indicators of educational performance that not only evaluate but also help shape public policy.”² The OECD, though fully aware that it has no legitimate claim, considers peer review assessments like PISA as “the most effective way of influencing the behaviour of sovereign states”.³ The idea for doing so was formed as early as 1961 at its policy conference “Economic Growth and Investment in Education in Washington D.C. “ The conference documents and recommendations immediately became - as the Cultural Commission of the Council of Europe uncritically

¹It must be pointed out that, in contrast to the German PISA documentation, in many cases corresponding explicit formulations are not to be found in the English versions. This obviously raises a series of questions which as yet need to be answered, such as: Who and in whose interest were more explicit formulations made calculated to challenge the specific humanistic educational tradition as followed in the German speaking world?

For purposes of this paper, however, in the above cases translations of the German documentation are provided by the authors in the text to facilitate understanding, the original wording is provided in the footnotes. The original quote here reads:

„Man muss sich darüber im Klaren sein, dass die PISA-Tests mit ihrem Verzicht auf transnationale curriculare Validität (...) und der Konzentration auf die Erfassung von Basiskompetenzen ein didaktisches und bildungstheoretisches Konzept mit sich führen, das normativ ist.“ Deutsches PISA-Konsortium (ed.): PISA 2000. Basiskompetenzen von Schülerinnen und Schülern im internationalen Vergleich. Opladen 2001: 19.

“The point has to be made clear that, through its relinquishment of trans-national curricular validity [...] and concentration on core competencies, PISA's assessment instrumentation embodies a didactical and educational-theoretical concept with normative impact” [author's translation].

² Gurría, Angel. Editorial – 50 Years of Change in Education. *Education at a Glance*. OECD 2011: 13.

³ OECD. Getting the Grips on Globalisation. The OECD in a Changing World. OECD 2004: 23

stated in its preface to the German conference volume - the "basis for consultation in the national ministries and parliaments. They also exerted determinative influence on the entire public discourse on matters of education and education policy". And, „it is rare for such a conference to have such visible impact on the policy of so many countries".⁴

The conference was explicitly not about setting standards which would do justice to respective national traditions of education and education policy. On the contrary, the new standard was geared toward overruling all traditional concepts. The same conference volume states that, with regard to developing countries, it would be "nothing short of cutting a million people loose from a way of life that has constituted their living environment for hundreds or thousands of years. Everything achieved by these countries' schools and education until now has served social and religious aims which have primarily allowed for resignation and spiritual comfort; things that completely go against any economic sense of progress. Changing these century-old approaches may perhaps be the most difficult yet also most important task for education to accomplish in developing countries."⁵ It is important to note here that the OECD includes the nations of Europe in this circle of developing countries. Germany, for example, "due to its decentralized school administration system (...) may also be considered a somewhat underdeveloped country with regard to its education policy".⁶ The obvious consequence is that Germany is to be subjected to cultural uprooting as well.

The OECD program has declared war on the established plurality of educational goals and discourses (which have consistently reflected and renewed these goals) in order to replace it with a single novel concept: "Schools should lay the very foundation for the attitudes, desires and expectations motivating a nation to pursue progress and to think and act economically."⁷ It is no longer about teaching people how to set their own standards in a socially responsible

⁴ Kulturkommission des Europarates. *Wirtschaftswachstum und Bildungsaufwand. Europäische Kulturpolitik* (Vol. 2) [Dokumentation on the OECD Conference in Washington in 1961] Vienna, Frankfurt, Munich Europa Verlag, 1966: 9-10.

"Die Konferenzunterlagen und die Ergebnisse der Diskussion waren Gegenstand der Beratung der nationalen Ministerien und Parlamente. Sie wurden außerdem stark bestimmend für die gesamte öffentliche Erörterung pädagogischer und bildungspolitischer Probleme [...]".

⁵ Ibid: 38

"Das bedeutet nichts weniger als dass Millionen Menschen von einer Lebensweise losgerissen werden sollen, die seit Jahrhunderten und Jahrtausenden das Lebensmilieu ausmachte. Alles was bisher an Schulen und in der Erziehung in diesen Ländern geleistet wurde, verfolgte soziale und religiöse Ziele, die vorwiegend (...) Resignation und spirituelle Tröstung gewährten; Dinge, die jedem wirtschaftlichen Fortschrittsdenken glatt zuwiderlaufen. Diese jahrhundertealten Einstellungen zu verändern, ist vielleicht die schwerste, aber auch die vordringlichste Aufgabe der Erziehung in den Entwicklungsländern."

⁶ Ibid: 78

„...mit seiner dezentralisierten Schulverwaltung ... [könnte] Deutschland, was die Erziehungsplanung angeht, auch als ein etwas unterentwickeltes Land betrachtet werden ...“

⁷ Ibid: 38

"In der Schule soll jener Grundsatz von Einstellungen, von Wünschen und von Erwartungen geschaffen werden, der eine Nation dazu bringt, sich um den Fortschritt zu bemühen, wirtschaftlich zu denken und zu handeln."

manner. Instead, the goal of education is to achieve "competency in constant adaptation",⁸ particularly with regard to adaptation to abstract economic demands. The OECD Conference documentation of 1961 declares unequivocally:⁹ "It goes without saying that the educational system must be an aggregate of the economy, it is just as necessary to prepare people for the economy as real assets and machines. The educational system is now equal to highways, steel works and chemical fertilizers".¹⁰ Thus the claim can be made "without blushing and with good economic conscience" that "the accumulation of intellectual capital is comparable to the accumulation of real capital – and in the long range may outmatch it".¹¹ The OECD has adhered to this same human capital theory until the very present. In the OECD book *Human Capital of 2007* one reads for instance that "individual capabilities" are „a kind of capital – an asset just like a spinning wheel or a flour mill" which can "yield returns".¹² Congruously the OECD has since 1961 considered education to be an „economic investment" in humans,¹³ where teachers - as the "production factor"¹⁴ - and students - as the "raw material"¹⁵ - play a decisive role. Today the willingness and ability to adapt is even considered by the OECD as a core competence.¹⁶ Its concept of literacy - embodied in the term reading competency – has meanwhile become the basis for Germany's education standards and is primarily geared to "how well adults use information to function in society and the economy".¹⁷

Before PISA, and despite the dissent involved in issues of education policy particularly with regard to the discourse in Germany, it was undisputed that, not only from a humanist but also a Christian and social-emancipatory view, education had nothing to do with adaptation. This standpoint is also contradictory to the basic requirement of education to promote responsible

⁸ Ibid: 37

⁹See Footnote 1

¹⁰ Ibid: 40

"Heute versteht es sich von selbst, dass auch das Erziehungswesen in den Komplex der Wirtschaft gehört, dass es genauso notwendig ist, Menschen für die Wirtschaft vorzubereiten wie Sachgüter und Maschinen. Das Erziehungswesen steht nun gleichwertig neben Autobahnen, Stahlwerken und Kunstdüngerfabriken."

¹¹ Ibid

„Wir können nun, ohne zu erröten und mit gutem ökonomischem Gewissen versichern, daß die Akkumulation von intellektuellem Kapital der von Realkapital an Bedeutung vergleichbar – auf lange Dauer vielleicht sogar überlegen – ist."

¹² Keeley, Brian: *Human Capital. How what you know shapes your life.* OECD Insights 2007: 27-30

¹³ *Wirtschaftswachstum und Bildungsaufwand 1966:* 40

¹⁴ Ibid: 44

¹⁵ Ibid: 45

¹⁶ Core competencies are to promote „adaptability to a world characterized by change, complexity and interdependence". "What adaptable skills are needed to hold pace with technological change?" [authors' translation; the original reads: "sich an eine durch Wandel, Komplexität und wechselseitige Abhängigkeit gekennzeichnete Welt anzupassen." „Welche anpassungsfähigen Eigenschaften werden benötigt, um mit dem technologischen Wandel Schritt zu halten?"] OECD: *Definition und Auswahl von Schlüsselkompetenzen. Zusammenfassung.* 2005: 9, 8

¹⁷ OECD: *Literacy in the Information Age. Final Report of the International Adult Literacy Survey.* Paris 2000: X

citizenship in a democratic state of law, and in addition is contrary to the educational mission established in each individual German state constitution. The OECD however has chosen its concept of adaptability to an outer economic environment as the yardstick for all educational success.

As if that were not enough: The environment to which pupils and students are to adapt is not the economy of real experience but rather a mere ideal concept generated by mainstream economists, particularly those of the Chicago School of Economics who, in their pursuit of “economic imperialism”¹⁸, have applied it to education: Its concept of a market is a purely abstract super-conscious price and coordination mechanism according to which all human activity must be aligned. What this unrealistic worldview setting in turn impedes is any critique or will to change because rather than being understood by the public as a theoretical construct it is, according to the neoliberal economist August Hayek, accepted by most as an immediately evident truth.¹⁹ Whether they are true or false, economic theories and all assessments based on these (such as PISA) determine reality. Those who choose criteria as a yardstick for everything else establish an arbitrary point of standardization where verification need not be feared.²⁰ These ungrounded criteria then become – untested and without further thought – the defining norm for all further actions. As long as people believe having more PISA points is better than less in order to be successful economically they will, of course, do everything they can to acquire more. Education is then forced to uncritically yield to the pressure of comparative assessment, even if it is based on pure assertion.

The OECD itself conceded in 2011 that the PISA indicators „are performing a more influential role. Indicators can prompt change by raising national concern over weak educational outcomes compared to international benchmarks.”²¹ The standard not only measures reality it creates its own, although perceivable correlations between PISA progress and actual educational achievement have continued to be weak, as the OECD itself repeatedly admits.²² As the public relations specialist Walter Lippman, a close associate of Hayek, stated, while attention is focused on a mere illusory world – or pseudo-environment - the same however determines practice. In the case of PISA this means it determines the actual practice of education policy makers as well as of teachers in schools: „It is the insertion between man

¹⁸ Cf. Becker, Gary S. Economic Imperialism. *Religion and Liberty* 3. 2:1993

¹⁹ Hayek, Friedrich A.: *Recht, Gesetzgebung und Freiheit* (Vol 1.) Landsberg am Lech 1980:100

²⁰ This explains why the OECD has, as Volker Ladenthin (2014) explains, for the past 40 years been able to repeatedly alarm the public and policy makers with purportedly empirical “insights” into the apparently catastrophic state of the German educational system without hardly having its economic standard or strategic goals questioned. (cf. the role of the OECD and PISA in the context of cultural-economic warfare Krautz 2013: 96-115 in particular)

²¹ Gurría 2011:17

²² cf. Ibid: 17

and his environment of a pseudo-environment. To that pseudo-environment his behavior is a response. But because it *is* behavior, the consequences, if they are acts, operate not in the pseudo-environment where the behavior is stimulated, but in the real environment where action eventuates.²³ Teachers and students have long since been feeling the consequences: The illusory world of OECD criteria has made education and pedagogics disappear from schools only to be replaced by a dominance of aloof diagnostics and evaluations. The pseudo-environment interposed by the PISA yardstick alienates countries from their own cultural roots and dissolves the necessary interpersonal basis of educational practice.²⁴ The immediate experiences gained from pedagogic practice lose their importance in education because the focus on the part of policy makers, the public and also the educational sciences is fixed on the illusory world projected by statistics. Lippman himself called the art of making pseudo-environments unconsciously determinative by strategic media campaigns „the manufacture of consent“.²⁵ Edward Bernays, the inventor of modern public relations coined the original term for it: propaganda.²⁶

The uncanny power of assessment does not ultimately lie in the results it produces. Independent of what PISA exactly measures, and regardless whether good or bad results are produced, the power lies in the processes of measurement themselves and in being assessed. People become accustomed to vacuously differentiating between quantities of more or less without asking about differences in quality of education. They prepare themselves for a world in which everything is geared to growth and in which success is measured purely by numbers.

Yet the world has been fixed on PISA's pseudo-environment and its invisible governance long enough. In the future, countries will continue to be subjected to PISA-staged „shock“ waves and quickly triggered reforms²⁷ which – without further reflection – effectively turn their educational world upside down once more. It is time to stop PISA's program of cultural uprooting with its concomitant undermining of education, democracy and the real economy. Ultimately, the major question to be asked by all concerned is who actually profits from an education system oriented to PISA's brand of pseudo-environment?

²³ Lippmann 1921: I, 3

²⁴ Cf. on the personalist and interpersonal basis of education and pedagogy Krautz/Schieren 2013.

²⁵ Lippmann 1921: III, 4

²⁶ Bernays, Edward: Propaganda. New York 1928.

On the correlations between educational reform emanating from PISA and propaganda see Krautz (2013)

²⁷ Gurría 2011: 19. This „shock strategy“ which the OECD states to play a central role in its activity has been analysed by Klein (2007) as a characteristic of aggressive neo-liberal capitalism.

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