

INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION ASSESSMENTS AND SURVEYS: INTERVIEW WITH ANDREAS SCHLEICHER

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ABSTRACT

In this interview, Andreas Schleicher, Director for Education and Skills, and Special Advisor on Education Policy to the Secretary-General at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), comments on the role of the OECD and, in particular, of the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), in the international education context, its relationship with actors in the educational community, as well as the impacts of its performance. The interview also addresses aspects related to Brazil's participation in OECD educational programs and projects.

KEYWORDS INTERNATIONAL ASSESSMENT • COMPARATIVE RESEARCH • PISA • OECD.

AVALIAÇÕES E PESQUISAS EDUCACIONAIS INTERNACIONAIS: ENTREVISTA COM ANDREAS SCHLEICHER

RESUMO

Nesta entrevista, Andreas Schleicher, Diretor de Educação e Assessor Especial em Política Educacional da Secretaria Geral da Organização para a Cooperação e Desenvolvimento Econômico (OCDE), comenta sobre o papel da OCDE e, em especial, do Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), no contexto educacional internacional, sua relação com atores da comunidade educacional, bem como os impactos de sua atuação. A entrevista aborda, ainda, aspectos relativos à participação do Brasil em programas e projetos educacionais da OCDE.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE AVALIAÇÃO INTERNACIONAL • PESQUISA COMPARADA • PISA • OCDE.

EVALUACIONES E INVESTIGACIONES EDUCATIVAS INTERNACIONALES: ENTREVISTA CON ANDREAS SCHLEICHER

RESUMEN

En esta entrevista, Andreas Schleicher, Director de Educación y Asesor Especial en Política Educacional de la Secretaría General de la Organización para la Cooperación y el Desarrollo Económico (OCDE), comenta sobre el papel de la OCDE y, en especial, del Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), en el contexto educativo internacional; su relación con actores de la comunidad educacional; así como los impactos de su actuación. La entrevista aborda asimismo aspectos relativos a la participación de Brasil en programas y proyectos educativos de la OCDE.

PALABRAS CLAVE EVALUACIÓN INTERNACIONAL • INVESTIGACIÓN COMPARADA • PISA • OCDE.

PRESENTATION

Andreas Schleicher is Director for Education and Skills, and Special Advisor on Education Policy to the Secretary-General at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Andreas has a degree in Physics from the University of Hamburg in Germany, and a master's degree in mathematics from Deakin University in Australia. Prior to joining the OECD, Andreas was Director for Analysis at the International Association for Educational Achievement (IEA), where he helped develop the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), and analysis of education policy and systems are some of the main actions of the OECD Education Directorate under his leadership. In the interview, the following topics are discussed: the role of the OECD and, in particular, of PISA, in the international education context; their relationship with researchers, policy makers and other actors in the education community, as well as the impact of their actions at the

national, subnational and school levels. The interview also addresses some aspects of Brazil's participation in OECD educational programs and projects.

EAE: It is well-known that the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) works closely with analysts and policymakers from member and non-member countries to develop analysis and best practices in education. However, its relationship with universities, research institutions and researchers is less clear. How does the OECD interact with them? Does the Organization promote specific initiatives to support research focused on education policy and practice? How can a researcher explore the OECD knowledge base and data?

AS: Actually, we work a lot with universities, most of our instruments like the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) are developed with the help of leading academics and universities. We also work with a network of universities to build global connections. And we have a work programme to help higher education systems to look outwards to other countries. All the OECD knowledge base and data are available online, and we also provide assistance to researchers where they have questions. Over the last few years, we have also had a fellowship programme with which researchers can work at the OECD to carry out their research.

EAE: Countries with different social and economic status have increasingly joined the OECD initiatives. Schools in these countries usually face several additional challenges in comparison to schools in most OECD member countries, such as multiple-shift schools and overcrowded classrooms. What strategies does the OECD apply to take into account these differences? How can the OECD try to address these countries' agendas?

AS: Yes, we are trying to capture the context in which schools and school systems operate with even greater detail, so that

we can make meaningful comparisons. Most recently, we have started the PISA for Development initiative, through which we specifically tailor the PISA instruments to countries in the developing world, and this includes even assessing relevant skills of students who are not enrolled in school. And in comparing schools and school systems, we then can take those differences into account in our statistical models. But, even when you compare like with like schools across countries, you find amazing differences. For example, the 10% most disadvantaged school students in Vietnam still have better mathematics skills than the 10% most privileged students in most of Latin America. It is important to understand that the world is no longer divided between countries that are rich and well-educated and those that are poor and badly educated. Countries can choose to develop a superior education system and, if they succeed, it will yield huge rewards.

EAE: It seems that the OECD has changed its role over time, shifting from presenting analysis to engaging more in policy advising. Some critics argue that the Organization should refrain from recommending the adoption of specific policies. They question the uncertainty of these policies' efficacy and the use of the "one size fits all" approach. In their view, the OECD should restrict its role to producing information and supporting people on how to use it to decide on the best policies for their contexts. How do you see this criticism? What is the institutional role of the OECD?

AS: Actually, our approach is rarely to tell countries what to do, but rather to tell countries what everyone else around the world has been doing and with what success. We try to help policy-makers find answers rather than give them answers. Our aim is to help countries improve the quality, relevance and equity in learning and the strategies to achieve them can be very different in the context of different countries.

EAE: In addition to that, we notice that PISA is playing a key role for integrating countries under a global educational

agenda for improving education, which may conflict with local educational issues. How do you see this relationship between global and local agendas in education?

AS: I think the global and local perspectives are complementary. Yes, some say that international benchmarking works against diversity within education systems and devalues local cultures. They claim that using an international standard for measurement pushes countries and regions to lose their individual identity. But I argue quite the opposite. In the dark, all institutions and education systems look the same and it is international comparisons that shed light on differences and show what can and should be reformed. It is international comparisons that allow us to see the diverse nature of educational policies and practices and draw benefit from this knowledge for the design and implementation of policies and practices.

Perhaps most importantly, an international perspective provides an opportunity for policymakers and practitioners to have a much clearer view of their own education systems, revealing more of the underlying beliefs and structures. Such perspective can hold up a revealing mirror to show the distinguishing characteristics, the strengths and weaknesses. This understanding holds out the promise that education systems can be better understood and then changed and improved.

I think there are too many walls between education systems, with few opportunities for countries to look outwards to educational policies developed and implemented beyond their borders. There is not much learning from other people's experience. This is why international comparisons such as PISA are so important. They can show what is possible in education, in terms of the quality, equity and efficiency of educational services achieved by the world's educational leaders; they can foster better understanding of how different education systems address similar problems; and they can help set meaningful targets in terms of measurable goals achieved by the world's educational leaders.

EAE: When the OECD shares best policies and practices, it assumes both an ethical and a technical responsibility. What are the ethical and technical criteria adopted by the Organization to identify and share best policies and practices?

AS: The ethical criteria revolve around the future of children. Our Education 2030 programme spells out the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that we believe will help children think for themselves and work with and for others. The technical criteria revolve around relevance, validity, and reliability of comparisons.

EAE: More specifically, there are some criticisms due to the nature of the data produced by the OECD and its use. The design of PISA and TALIS, for example, is cross-sectional, which is restricted to drawing on correlations between different measures. Nonetheless, the Organization reports and presentations usually contain some recommendations related to these correlations, or even make use of expressions such as “effects”, which give the idea of causality. What are the OECD guidelines for its analysts to produce information based on this type of data?

AS: Yes, many of our data sources are cross-sectional, and in their own do not allow for causal inferences. Education is highly value-laden. Systems develop for historical reasons that reflect the values and preferences of parents, students, administrators, politicians and many others. But decision makers in education can benefit from international comparisons, in the same way that business leaders learn about the range of factors that lead to success taking inspiration from the lessons of others, and then adapting them to the local context. This is not about specifying a formula for success. It is not about policy prescriptions. It is about describing the experience of countries whose education systems have proven exceptionally successful to help identify policy options for others. And when we draw inferences, it will never be on the basis of the data alone, but on the basis of numerous pieces of information.

EAE: PISA has directed its attention to issues beyond student achievement, as we can see in the recently published report *PISA 2015 Results (Volume III): Students' Well-Being*. This kind of initiative should be encouraged, since it provides data that can enhance research on a very important issue. But there are many other important issues such as student well-being. Why was this theme chosen? How does a theme enter the PISA agenda?

AS: The themes are chosen by the participating countries, and these are difficult choices because they reflect both what is important and what is possible to assess. The use of computer-delivered assessment for PISA means that a wider range of knowledge and skills can now be tested. The PISA 2012 assessment of creative problem-solving skills, the PISA 2015 assessment of collaborative problem-solving skills, and the planned PISA 2018 assessment of global competencies provide examples for this. But not everything is yet amenable to such approaches to testing. More challenging is the development of measures of social and emotional skills. But even here the report *Skills for Social Progress*, published by the OECD in 2015, showed that many of their components can now be measured meaningfully. All that being said, it will take a long time until assessments such as PISA can adequately represent the key endowments needed for learning and human development, such as: the true, the realm of human knowledge and learning; the beautiful, the realm of creativity, aesthetics and design; the good, the realm of ethics; the just and well-ordered, the realm of political and civic life; and the sustainable, the realm of natural and physical health.

EAE: Research consistently shown that some schools' strategies to improve results in national assessments are, in fact, contributing to increase inequalities. What is the role of international assessments, such as PISA, in this matter? Can they support governments to overcome these inequalities or do they just push for more competition and therefore more disparities?

AS: Showing that quality and equity in education can be reconciled has been one of the most important themes of PISA. In fact, PISA shows again and again that most of the highest performing education systems are also the ones that achieve high levels of equity. But, more important than that, PISA gives countries extensive guidance on how to improve equity in educational opportunity and outcomes.

EAE: More than playing a role in national-level policy, PISA for Schools seems to be innovating by drilling down further to school level. What are the objectives of PISA for Schools? A Brazilian municipality, Sobral (in Ceará state), has just announced that some local schools will take part on this initiative. What can we expect from it? How can schools and policymakers profit from participating in PISA for Schools?

AS: With PISA for schools we are trying to give schools themselves the tools to look outward. And schools are beginning to use that data. In September 2014, I opened the first annual gathering of schools in the United States that had taken this test, and it was encouraging to see how much interest there was among schools in comparing themselves not only with their neighbouring schools but also with the best schools internationally. In Fairfax County, Virginia, 10 schools had started a year-long discussion among principals and teachers based on the results of the first reports. With the help of district offices (and the OECD), they were digging deeper into their data to understand how their schools compared with each other and with other schools around the world. Those principals and teachers were beginning to see themselves as teammates, not just spectators, on a global playing field. In other words, in Fairfax County, big data had begun to build big trust.

EAE: From 2003 to 2015, Brazil's performance in mathematics in PISA has improved by 21 score points even though the country considerably increased students' enrollment in school - a remarkable improvement, according to the OECD. However, this was not the case regarding science and reading, whose

results remained stable in the period. This is quite intriguing, since most federal and local policies implemented in the period focused on improving student achievement in both mathematics and reading. Do you have any hypothesis on why Brazil's performance improved in mathematics but not in reading despite receiving similar investments? Do you know similar cases?

AS: This has been studied in detail in the Brazilian National PISA report.

EAE: The Brazilian government has recently sent a formal request to join the OECD. If Brazil became a member, how would the country's participation in the OECD educational projects and programs change? How can the Brazilian educational community benefit from these changes?

AS: Brazil is already an active member in most key education initiatives of the OECD.

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