



## The PISA Shock: Neoliberal Reform and the Marketization of Global Education

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### Abstract

Large-scale international assessments, such as PISA, TIMSS, and PIRLS, have transformed education into a global market governed by standardized data. Neoliberal reforms utilize these metrics to push for development and governance dictated by numbers. Through the “PISA Shock” phenomenon, international rankings create national crises that allow governments to justify policy changes and reforms directed at “global” norms of quality education. This raises the question of whether universal quality is a necessary global standard or a form of neocolonialism where Northern economic values are imposed on the Global South. Furthermore, the emphasis on standardized testing often impacts cultural relevance and local school curricula. Standardized education policies often prioritize economic productivity over learning, leading to the marketization of public education. A comparison between Mexico’s 2013 Reforma Educativa and Germany’s response to the 2001 PISA results illustrates a global shift toward accountability and standardization. These frameworks frequently frame teachers as the primary problem while forcing schools to abandon diverse curricula in favor of so-called 21st-century skills. Ultimately, the reliance on these metrics creates a market where educational success can be purchased through private tutoring, effectively measuring parental wealth rather than student interest and ability.

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### Global assessments, governance of numbers, and neoliberal reform

International large-scale assessments began as research instruments designed to compare student performance. Over the last few decades, they have transitioned to become central pillars of educational governance. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) now appeal to a growing number of countries, and their results are treated as authoritative evidence about the quality of national school systems (Chmielewski et al., 2017). Among these assessments, PISA is the most politically visible. It presents itself as a neutral measure of student skills, but its real power lies in the rankings, data, and recommendations it produces. These results circulate through media headlines, policy briefs, and international reports. They offer a simple story of winners and losers that is attractive to politicians who want institutional, standardized numerical signals about where their country stands in the global ranks.

The growing influence of PISA reflects a larger shift in how education is governed. Scholars describe this as the “governance of numbers,” a system in which quantified indicators guide decisions and policymaking processes and become the main evidence of progress or failure (Gorur, 2015). Instead of analyzing what a good education system should look like in their own context, national governments are pushed to ask whether their numbers are high enough compared to other countries, and then to classify themselves or be classified by others as either “developed” or “developing” based on those rankings. In these cases, the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) creates what Gorur (2015) calls “calculable worlds,” taking the complex and local reality of classrooms and compressing it into standard categories, regression tables, and national averages. This translation makes schools seem manageable from OECD’s offices in Paris and invites global comparison between multigrade single-teacher classrooms elsewhere, including in southern Mexico and specialized STEM programs in Germany.

This numerical system is now part of an audit culture where states increasingly govern at a distance by using standardized test results to monitor schools rather than managing them directly (Verger and Parcerisa, 2019), with test-based accountability as the main driving mechanism. If a school or a district fails to achieve target scores, it is labeled as underperforming and may face sanctions, restructuring, or public shame. Audit culture changes the everyday work of teachers. Under constant surveillance, many educators feel pressured to prioritize what tests measure and leave aside what they know their students need. Indicators then do more than describe reality. They reconfigure education and create a new reality in which only measurable outcomes matter, narrowing the curriculum and discouraging risk-taking or culturally responsive teaching (Gorur, 2015).

Not all assessments serve the same purposes. The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), a consortium of research institutions, runs curriculum-based tests such as TIMSS and PIRLS. These assessments ask whether students learned the material prescribed by their national curricula and focus on pedagogical questions and

classroom practice. The OECD, by contrast, is an economic organization whose main concerns are growth, productivity, and competitiveness. PISA reflects this position. Rather than testing specific curriculum content, it measures what the OECD believes are the skills needed for effective participation in modern economies (Chmielewski et al., 2017). The shift from curriculum to skills moves attention away from what nation states choose to teach toward what the global labor market requires.

Countries join PISA for many reasons, and improving teaching quality is only one of them. Participation indicates that a government is modern, accountable, and willing to accept and incorporate international standards. It offers what Addey and Sellar (2018) call policy legitimacy by associating national reforms with the authority of the OECD. Even when results are disappointing, the act of taking part helps governments claim that they are engaged in global best practices. Fear is another driver. In an era of knowledge economies, no government wants to be seen as falling behind. When neighboring countries participate in PISA, the pressure to join becomes stronger. A state that opts out risks appearing uncompetitive. This anxiety feeds into a culture of policy borrowing: officials and national educational agencies look at high-performing systems, identify a few headline policies, and attempt to copy them at home, often without much attention to their local context (Breakspear, 2012).

Participation can also be a tool for internal politics. A government might use low PISA scores to justify a reform that was already planned by pointing to an international failure they can easily silence local concerns. This strategy uses what Steiner-Khamsi (2019) identifies as the dual mechanism of “scandalization” and “externalization.” By manufacturing a national crisis out of rankings, governments can “externalize” the solution by pointing to global standards to support local policy changes that would otherwise face opposition. These motivations are diverse and depend on the local context, but the result is often the same: national education systems become increasingly isomorphic, converging around similar structures and practices as they move away from local traditions and toward a single global model. This standardization is a key outcome of the neoliberal marketization of global education (Addey and Sellar, 2018). Neoliberalism, the underlying force that shapes how international large-scale standardized tests are used, is a political and economic project that seeks to reconstruct the social order around the market principles of competition, efficiency, and individual responsibility (Ambrosio, 2013).

### **Neoliberalism and the Politics of Global Education Governance**

Ambrosio (2013) argues that accountability regimes do not simply reorganize funding or introduce new tests; they redefine what counts as a good school and a good student. Within this framework, schools start to organize daily life around market ideals like competition, efficiency, and individual responsibility, and making high-stakes testing one of the main drivers for this moral reform. When test scores become the main measure of quality, learning is treated as a product and students as consumers. Schools compete for rankings, parents shop for the best scores, and teachers are judged by numerical outputs rather than by the relationships and forms of care they build in classrooms. Neoliberal accountability makes promises of equity and

excellence but often delivers neither. It tends to reproduce social hierarchies while claiming to neutralize them (Ambrosio, 2013).

Teachers have a particularly fraught position in this story. In many educational reforms, they are seen and treated as technicians who need to implement standardized curriculums and deliver measurable outcomes. When scores are low, the system blames individual educators rather than structural factors such as poverty, segregation, or underfunding. Tuck (2013) argues that this logic moves toward nihilism: it strips teaching of its social purpose and ties it with a larger project of colonialism that aims to replace diverse ways of living and learning with a single market-based model. In this sense, the PISA framework is just another piece of the neoliberal effort to reshape public education into a competitive service industry.

The human-capital framework promoted by organizations like the OECD and the World Bank assumes that higher test scores lead directly to economic growth. This belief drives efforts to standardize curricula and strengthen accountability systems (Auld et al., 2019). It frames education as a private investment rather than a public good. Individuals are expected to upgrade their skills to remain competitive, and countries are expected to raise their averages to attract capital. Connell (2013) argues that market reforms almost inevitably increase inequality because markets depend on winners and losers. In education, standardized assessments create the categories needed for this sorting. When schools or countries are publicly labeled as underperforming, they become “losers” that help justify new interventions, privatization, and settler-colonial projects.

Shadow education is one of the clearest examples of this marketization. Across many countries, a large tutoring industry has increased around standardized tests. Families that can afford it, purchase extra lessons tailored specifically to the content and format of exams. In such contexts, a PISA score does not simply reflect student ability; it reflects access to private support and the size of a family’s wallet. Market-driven reforms often widen existing social gaps and make them seem like neutral measures of merit (Connell, 2013).

### **Responding to the PISA shock: Germany and Mexico**

Germany’s experience shows how a single round of PISA results can restructure an entire policy landscape. Before 2001, many Germans believed their school system was among the strongest in the world. It was seen as rigorous, orderly, and intrinsically welded to the country’s economic success. The first PISA results destroyed that self-image. German students scored below the OECD average in reading, mathematics, and science, and the data revealed a strong link between socioeconomic background and achievement (Waldow, 2009; Davoli and Entorf, 2018). The media response was intense. Headlines described the findings as a national disgrace, and the term “PISA shock” entered the vocabulary of public debate. Waldow notes that this shock was not only about low scores; it exposed inequalities, particularly those affecting students from working-class and migrant backgrounds (Waldow, 2009). The traditional tripartite tracking system, which separated students into different school types at an early age, came under scrutiny.

Policy makers used this window to push for educational reforms. The OECD reports provided both the diagnosis and the plan. They highlighted Germany's lack of national standards and recommended stronger central oversight and systematic evaluation (OECD, 2001). The OECD suggested that Germany lacked a culture of evaluation and needed to move toward a system based on measurable outcomes (OECD, 2001). In the national climate of urgency created by the PISA shock, measures that would previously have faced resistance now seemed necessary.

In response, Germany created national educational standards, *Bildungsstandards*, and established large-scale assessments to monitor their implementation. This marked a major shift in a system that had historically left educational and curricular control to the *Bundesländer*, or federal states (Davoli and Entorf, 2018). Over time, Germany's PISA scores improved, and some indicators suggested a small reduction in the link between socioeconomic background and performance (Davoli and Entorf, 2018). These changes were cited as evidence that data-driven reform had worked, yet significant inequalities persisted, especially for students from low-income and migrant families. Critics argued that the improvements came from reducing instruction and establishing closer relations between test content and classroom practice. Teaching to the test became common, raising questions about whether learning itself had deepened or whether students had simply improved at taking PISA tests (Waldow, 2009). In other words, the German case illustrates how a PISA shock can legitimize a move toward tighter central control and national measures without fundamentally transforming the social distribution of educational opportunities.

Mexico's path into the PISA framework unfolded in a different political and social context. During the 1990s, government efforts to improve education focused on decentralization and expanding access. Ministries of education were often weak, while teacher unions and bureaucracies held significant power, making national reform difficult (Grindle, 2002). Participation in international assessments introduced a new pressure. By the early 2000s, Mexico's PISA results showed that while basic indicators such as enrollment and literacy had improved, student performance in mathematics and science were behind many other countries. OECD data revealed that 40.1% of Mexican 15-year-olds failed to reach Level 2 in reading (Santiago et al., 2012). This level is the organization's minimum requirement for students to participate effectively in society. The OECD's 2012 review of Mexico's evaluation system called for a more coherent framework to assess students, teachers, and schools, framing education as an urgent economic issue (Santiago et al., 2012). The review argued that the lack of a strong teacher appraisal system was a key weakness in the Mexican structure (Santiago et al., 2012). These reports did not simply diagnose low performance; they framed weak evaluation as a central obstacle to economic competitiveness, which Mexican policy makers used to justify institutional changes.

The 2013 *Reforma Educativa* emerged from this context. Presented as a constitutional restructure, it aimed to modernize Mexican education by aligning it with global standards and strengthening accountability. Central to the reform were new rules for teacher appointments, promotions, and evaluations, as well as increased testing of students and schools (Canedo, 2016). For the government, the reform was a chance to demonstrate commitment to international standards and to project an image of modernity on the global stage. Teacher evaluation quickly

became the most controversial aspect. Authorities promoted it as a way to improve quality and reward merit. Many teachers, however, saw it as a punitive system that ignored the conditions in which they worked. Large protests, strikes, and school closings spread across several states as teachers and administrators challenged the legitimacy of the new tests and the threat of job loss (Canedo, 2016).

Silva Montes and Gutiérrez Lozano (2020) show that the reform produced a significant precarization of public teaching. Newly hired teachers faced weaker job security, lower benefits, and higher workloads than previous generations, even as performance expectations increased (Montes & Lozano, 2020). Evaluation was tied to employment in ways that increased anxiety without necessarily improving infrastructure, support, or professional development. The reform framed Mexico's educational failure as a problem of teacher quality, hiding other factors such as underfunding, regional inequalities, and the challenges of working in marginalized communities. Many teachers felt reduced to test score producers. Instead of strengthening trust and collaboration, the reform widened the gap between the state and the teachers. Here, PISA operates less as a call for coordination between federal structures, as in Germany, and more as a system that legitimizes disciplining teachers.

Mexico's PISA 2012 results were often cited as justification for the 2013 reform. The country ranked relatively high within Latin America but still missed the OECD average by roughly two years of schooling in major subjects, and performance gains had reduced after 2009 (Bos et al., 2014). However, standardized metrics struggled to capture the social and cultural complexity of Mexican schools. Research shows that student outcomes are strongly shaped by family background and school composition; much of the differences in performance come from differences between schools rather than from individual effort alone (Alves & Candido, 2020). Blanco's (2017) analysis of PISA 2012 in Mexico finds that cultural resources at home, such as access to books and parental education, strongly influence students' approach towards learning. For a student in a rural or indigenous community, such as those in Chiapas, a test designed according to global norms may have limited cultural relevance. The reliance on PISA scores to judge school quality risks misjudging structural inequalities as individual or institutional failures.

Political directions shifted with Mexico's 2018 presidential election. In 2019, the new government led by Andrés Manuel López Obrador cancelled key parts of the 2013 reform, including the Law of Professional Teaching Service, and dissolved the National Institute for Educational Evaluation, which oversaw teacher testing. A new body, the National System for the Improvement of Education, was created to focus on diagnostic assessments and system support (Gómez Collado, 2020). More than 800 teachers who had been dismissed for refusing evaluations were reinstated, signaling a desire to repair relations and change the culture of blame. Supporters saw the changes as a step away from punitive neoliberal accountability and toward a more humanistic vision of schooling, while critics worried that abandoning strict evaluation would weaken efforts to address low performance or corruption (Gómez Collado, 2020). The fast reversal highlights how fragile PISA-centric accountability systems can be when they rely on punitive evaluations rather than shared understandings of the purpose of education.

Germany and Mexico show both divergence and convergence in their respective cycles of PISA shock. In Germany, a federal system used the PISA results to justify stronger national coordination and the introduction of standards and large-scale assessments, while leaving teacher employment structures largely intact. In Mexico, a more centralized state used PISA and the OECD recommendations to restructure teacher labor conditions and expand evaluation in a context shaped by regional inequalities and union power. In both cases, PISA rankings were used as evidence of national educational failure and used to justify reforms that standardized curricula, reinforced centralized accountability, and left the socio-economic hierarchies unchanged. This divergence and convergence in both countries' policy responses to the PISA shock suggest additionally that as neoliberal pressures inevitably contend with domestic political culture, the result can be disruptive or even catastrophic in contexts like Mexico where sensitivity to colonial control and tensions surrounding globalization can mobilize political resistance.

### **Coloniality, inequality, and alternatives**

The German and Mexican cases also show how global assessments operate within longer systems of domination. Both systems respond to PISA by aligning more closely with OECD guidelines and with the human-capital ideology of international organizations, even when this contradicts local languages, communities, histories, and knowledge. To understand why these systems are not only neoliberal but also colonial, it is necessary to analyze how PISA perpetuates a broader hierarchy of power and knowledge.

The dynamics and systems outlined above are not only economic and administrative; they are also deeply rooted in coloniality. Quijano (2000) describes the coloniality of power as a pattern that emerged with the formation of the modern world, combining racial hierarchies with Eurocentric knowledge and capitalist exploitation. International assessments such as PISA operate within this pattern by treating Western forms of knowledge as the universal measure for educational success. Mignolo argues that challenging this system requires *epistemic disobedience*, a deliberate effort to move away from Eurocentric assumptions about who produces valid knowledge and what counts as rationality (Mignolo, 2010). Most global metrics assume that the Global North is the site of science and objectivity, while the Global South is a source of data, culture, or problems to be solved (Mignolo, 1995). When countries in the Global South adapt their curricula and standards to align with PISA, they often do so at the expense of local epistemologies, languages, and ways of being.

The curriculum is a clear site where this struggle plays out. Fúnez-Flores (2024) shows how curriculum design can be an instrument of domination that reproduces Euro-Anglo-American ways of life and marginalizes other worldviews. He describes this as the “coloniality of the curriculum,” a process that shapes the unique ways of thinking and being to fit the needs of global capitalism (Fúnez-Flores, 2024). When the OECD defines what all 15-year-olds should know, it is not simply proposing a neutral set of skills; it is advancing a system that erases alternative concepts of knowledge, community, and self. Standardized tests enforce this curriculum by rewarding conformity and treating different ways of learning as mistakes. Indigenous knowledge, oral traditions, and collective forms of learning are rarely recognized. In this way, the global testing

system establishes a hierarchy of knowledge that keeps the Global South dependent on Northern models and works against the efforts to build plural and decolonial educational projects.

Across contexts, neoliberal accountability policies tend to reinforce patterns of exclusion rather than dismantle them. Tuck (2013) argues that test-based systems contribute to school exclusion and the marginalization of youth who do not fit the narrow mold of the “good student.” When accountability is framed only in terms of standardized metrics, it often ignores the histories of dispossession, racism, and economic inequality that shape students’ lives and school contexts. Marketization transforms success into a commodity. To keep the market running, there must be visible winners and losers. PISA and similar programs help support those categories by setting standards and scores that appear to reflect merit but often reflect the unequal access to resources (Connell, 2013). Families with economic means can respond strategically by moving to higher-performing districts, paying for private tutoring, or enrolling their children in private schools, while families without such options must manage the stigma of low scores and the material consequences of underfunded schools. Tutoring industries grow fastest where exams have large rewards or penalties; what appears as individual achievement is frequently the outcome of advantages and investments (Huang, 2013).

If PISA-centered reform reinforces inequality and coloniality, what might alternatives look like? Dall (2011) argues that PISA can be counterproductive to building genuinely successful education systems because it narrows attention to measured outcomes and ignores broader educational purposes. A different approach would start with the well-being of students, the vitality of communities, and the culture of critical, creative abilities rather than international standards. Walsh (2023) calls for “pedagogies of life” that emerge from decolonial praxis and prioritize dignity, relationality, and collective survival over market productivity. These pedagogies recognize the value of knowledge based in the territory and memory and try to find replacements in the dominant neoliberal system where other ways of being and learning can exist.

Harari and Pozzebon find Freire’s *metodología otra* as one alternative. It challenges Western research standards by centering the voices of those who have experienced oppression and by inviting researchers and practitioners to learn to unlearn colonial habits of mind (Harari and Pozzebon, 2024). Concepts like interculturality and feeling-thinking emphasize that knowledge is not only cognitive but also emotional, relational, and situated. Tuck (2013) similarly points to indigenous models of reform as spaces where education can be reoriented toward survival, resurgence, and refusal of settler colonial logics. These approaches do not offer a single path. Instead, they insist that the way we see education must be built from the ground up, in dialogue with local communities, rather than imposed through global standards. In the context of PISA, this means imagining forms of assessment and accountability that are responsive first to the communities and territories they represent, not an international economic organization.

## Conclusion

The global reliance on PISA has a fragile foundation. Komatsu and Rappleye (2017) show that the statistical links between PISA scores and economic growth are often weak or misleading, yet they continue to inform major policy decisions. Countries with high scores do not always

experience strong growth, and students in top-performing systems sometimes report low interest or high stress (Komatsu & Rappleye, 2017). Despite these contradictions, the PISA system persists, supported by the authority of numbers and the promise of evidence-based policy (Pons, 2017; Volante and Mattei, 2024). The global testing system presents itself as neutral aid but frequently reshapes education in ways that reflect Northern priorities more than local needs.

The PISA shock is not just a moment of surprise. It is a tool for neoliberal marketization. By turning rankings into crises, it opens a policy window for reforms that standardize curricula, discipline teachers, and invite privatization, all while leaving structural inequalities largely intact. The cases of Germany and Mexico show that more testing and tighter accountability do not automatically produce more justice. Building truly equitable and meaningful education systems requires epistemic freedom and political courage. It means listening to communities in Chiapas, seeing teachers as intellectuals, and valuing knowledge that does not fit into a spreadsheet. Moving past the governance of numbers is not about rejecting evaluation altogether. It is about refusing to let global metrics define the purpose of local education.

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