

# Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage

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## **The Global Education Race: Taking the Measure of PISA and International Testing**

By Sam Sellar, Greg Thompson, and David Rutkowski

Foreword by David C. Berliner and Pasi Sahlberg

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### **Reviewed by / Revu par**

Ulana Plawuszczak Pidzamecky

University of Ontario Institute of Technology

*The Global Education Race* is a concise, yet thoughtful, pragmatic and well-referenced look at the role of large-scale international student testing, in particular, the highly-influential Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), in hopes of addressing some of the key challenges of gathering metrics that can be equally understood, valued and applied world-wide. The position taken by authors Sam Sellar, Greg Thompson, and David Rutkowski, seasoned academics and international education policy leaders, owes much to their conversations with Canadian educators from across the country. The aim of the book is to encourage continued public debate about the best learning for students in Canada, and more rigorous global discussion on education policy for students around the world.

In the foreword, distinguished Professor of Education Emeritus and member of the International Academy of Education, David C. Berliner, and respected Finnish scholar and chair of the Global Education Advisory Board of the Open Society Foundation, Pasi Sahlberg, remark on the daunting task of creating “Global Learning Metrics (GLMs)” (p. vii), referred to by the authors as “catalyst data” (p. 19), to identify best practices that can be adapted in any country. In relation to this, Berliner and Sahlberg draw attention to the main themes of the book, namely: 1. The difficulty of predicting the quality of human capital and a nation’s future competitiveness from the test scores of 15-year-olds; 2. Recognizing that test scores reflect certain socio-economic conditions, and not educational institutions; and 3. Coming to terms with the fact that the current international focus on reading, mathematical, and scientific literacies has eclipsed traditional emphasis on individual subjects, they note that the authors of the book have carefully documented their views and are neither anti-testing, nor anti-PISA. Rather, the book calls upon the leaders of member countries of the OECD (The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development), who are guided in their policy-making by PISA results, to exercise caution in the use of high-stakes standardized testing for the management of teacher practice and performance. The authors reason that educational rankings can be based on flawed statistics, which may not reflect reality and can negatively impact a country’s reputation. Other research in this area refers to this worrisome practice as reliance on “contemporary certainties” (Komatsu & Rappleye, 2017, p. 166).

The book is divided into eight chapters woven together by the authors’ engaging allegorical description of the consequences which can ensue from running head-strong towards a destination, without stopping to think along the way. In this way, the reader shares in the experience of the global education race, run upon “the PISA racetrack” (p. 5), where the fear of falling behind causes educators and world leaders to search frantically for the ideal educational model to help them reach first place. The writing is affable and the content well-illustrated with comparative, real-life examples. The authors include concise definitions of important terms, relevant charts and graphs, and the entire narrative is peppered with good-natured anecdotes about the human need to succeed.

Chapter 2 tells the educational story of various countries, including a closer examination of the celebrated Finnish model, and discusses how failure to examine the results of tests other than PISA (such as TIMSS—Trends in International Math and Science

Study) can conceal a country's less than stellar performance in other areas. While PISA was primarily designed to serve as a mechanism of educational policy discussion and to attract the attention of government ministers and advisors, it has, in many cases, become a euphemism for economic achievement. In fact, several recent, highly influential comparative studies have made statistical claims that improvements on global learning assessments such as PISA will lead to higher GDP growth rates (Komatsu & Rappleye, 2017). As a result, governments invested in such testing spend considerable time and resources cultivating media attention and coverage. However, as earlier research has already shown, PISA memes spread by the media project potentially misleading generalizations about where 'good education' can be found—Finland, East Asia—and where it is lacking—U.S., Australia, Canada (Waldow, Takayama & Sung, 2014).

In the chapters that follow, the authors examine the most contentious aspects of high-stakes testing. They discuss the problem of fixating on PISA rankings and suggest that investigating sub-national data (city, provincial, state) produces more complex and informative results. They describe how international large-scale tests are constructed, including the determination of achievement estimates from population samplings, and help the reader to understand the limitations inherent in this process. Factors affecting the comparison of performance between education systems are considered in terms of challenges to educational reforms. In this regard, contemporaneous research shows that overall performance rankings alone do not make a fair comparison when it comes to judging the quality of education in different countries. The socio-economic conditions of a country are vitally important when comparing global outcomes in education rankings (Lynch, 2017). In addition, the authors devote considerable attention to improving the valid use of standardized testing in the age of datafication, and make a strong case for the increased role of teacher voice in terms of the impacts on teaching and learning. The final two chapters deal with the politics of educational measurement. The authors share sound reasons for improving data literacy at all levels of decision-making, to help establish "technical democracy" (p. 90). The book concludes with a thought-provoking hypothetical situation where those who are vested in learning must address a Minister of Education about the latest PISA results in science education, which indicate that it is falling behind global science and technology developments. The authors build arguments to help both sides come to understand each other's viewpoint, so that all who are affected by high stakes educational assessments can proceed at a more measured pace.

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