

Edu World 2016
7th International Conference

**WHY REFERENCING PISA IN THE ROMANIAN RHETORIC ON
EDUCATIONAL REFORM DEMANDS CAUTION**

Mihaela Mitescu Manea (a)*

* Corresponding author

(a) Associate Professor, PhD, University of Arts "George Enescu" Iasi, Department of Teacher Education, Romania,
Str. Horia 7-9, Iasi, Romania, mihaelamitescu@yahoo.com

Abstract

The paper introduces a theoretical argument cautioning against the constant referencing of disappointing reports on international (*PISA*) and/or national examination (i.e. *Bacalaureat*, *Capacitate*, *Titulizare în Învățământ*) as springboards for reviving a repetitive rhetoric on the imperatives of the educational reform in Romania. It builds on the analysis model proposed by Münch (2014), confronting the concept of literacy applied by PISA test with the curriculum and typical lessons in Romanian secondary schools to explore the extent of their convergence and divergence. Findings indicate that such a focus successfully builds to a rhetoric of *deficit* in structuring discursive practices on educational reforms, which is neither theoretically sound, nor has it proved productive for envisioning tools and actions worthy of trust and eliciting educational agents' commitment at all levels of practice and decision. The proposed discussion seems particularly worthy of attention in contexts of educational practice with longstanding histories of conformity to prescribed educational policies.

© 2017 Published by Future Academy www.FutureAcademy.org.uk

Keywords: Educational reform; accountability; rhetoric of deficit.

1. Introduction

Relatively recent conceptual shifts in the discursive practices on education around the world are heavily impacting the way we think and speak of what, why and how needs to be done in the various contexts of educational practice, without much inquiry directed at identifying the sources and /or motives behind these conceptual shifts and their intended effects. It is argued that such a discussion is a worthy endeavour, especially in contexts of educational practice with longstanding histories of uniformity and

conformity to prescribed educational policies, attempting to break through to a haven of democratic participation to decision making in education.

With “accountability” becoming ‘a pervasive normalizing discourse, legitimizing historic shifts from viewing education as a social and cultural to an economic project engendering usable skills and competences’ (Meyer et al., 2014) and with the ‘remarkable rise of the concept of “learning” with a subsequent decline in the concept of “education” (Biesta, 2009), systems of education around the world are facing incredible pressures to align and conform to a new order of things, in the name of globalization. Resistance seems like “fighting a losing battle” (Münch, 2014), especially when these shifts are heavily endorsed by powerful agents, like the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Nonetheless, some express serious concern with the pervasive actions of OECD towards the globalization of education policy (Meyer et al., 2014), placing the focus of decision making not at community or national level (Martens, & Jakobi, 2010; Meyer, & Benavot, 2013), but at the intersection of national and international policy discourse, where OECD plays an increasingly central role (Mahon, & McBride, 2008). The arguments behind these concerns will be discussed here, along with what could explain the eagerly, hopeful and uncritical intake of OECD’s role and actions in educational policy, that Romanian education policy discourses today give constant evidence of.

2. Theoretical Foundations and Related Literature on PISA and Educational Reforms

Originally, OECD has not advanced any claim on playing a direct role in designing the policy in education (Labaree, 2014). It has, however, endorsed the emergence and the wide spread publicity of an instrument of measurement setting out “not to assess the extent to which [students] have mastered a specific curriculum” but rather “young people’s ability to use their knowledge [...] to meet real life challenges” (Meyer et al., 2014). Nowadays, despite the lack of consensus on what constitutes ‘real life challenges’ in the various contexts of educational practice, or who decides what constitutes relevant ‘knowledge’ over the vast variety of cultural, historical, social and psychological aspects impacting such decision-making, this assessment instrument has become a major referential not only in dictating a generalized sense of crisis in education, but in structuring curricular reforms around the world. Among the evidence supporting this observed pervasiveness is the growing number of countries participating in the OECD’s assessment exercises, raising at a very fast pace, from 34 in 2000, to 63 in 2012; another is the “subsequent reform scramble that countries from Germany (Ertl, 2006) to Japan (Takayama, 2008) have experienced” (Meyer et al., 2014).

The instrument, named Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), arose from a series of other international efforts to assess school achievement after the Second World War, starting with UNESCO’s three generation of comparative assessment studies in Mathematics and Science in 1950’, 1970’ and 1980’s (Labaree, 2014). The core challenge of making comparable the very different curricula and approaches to schooling and school provision in the 34 countries participating in the first year of PISA testing, in 2000, was resolved in simply stating it will look at young people’s preparedness in facing the challenges of real life (Labaree, 2014). By this, ‘real life challenges’ were equated with ‘the challenges of today’s knowledge society’ (idem), a phrasing which took very little time to be coined as a general point of reference in the educational rhetoric. Yet, the assumption that what PISA tests is

somehow important knowledge for the future at global level is functioning without sufficient or pertinent evidence that this is true. Instead, the evidence that exists indicates that PISA items “are based on the practical reasoning of its researchers and on pre-tests of what works in most or all settings – and not on systematic research on current or future knowledge structures and needs” (Hopmann, 2008).

What was accomplished in this overall reductionist approach taking an economical relevance stance on deciding what kind of knowledge is indicative of educational effectiveness and imposing a functionalist perspective to what constitutes priority in educational investment and strategy, was to emphasize a narrowing meaning and functions attributable to education.

Studies exploring what is lost in the course of positioning national systems of education in international hierarchies of educational effectiveness, based on learners’ measured capabilities to respond to specific tasks, considered representative of “real-life challenges”, point out that “the ideal of education as internalization of a cultural tradition embodied in accumulated knowledge” is the one exceptionally important educational endeavor under siege in this logic of “education as formation of human capital” (Münch, 2014). Along with it, are the sense of national pride and integrity which historically prevailed in the reasoning behind the early modern construction of national systems of education (Tröhler, Popkewitz and Labaree, 2011). Also, the sense of trust gained by demonstrating validity and relevance of reformist initiatives in education against national and local pedagogical traditions, is a casualty loss in this baffling exercise of power attempting uniformity at global level, leaving local institutions “in a state of uncertainty for decades, while being deconstructed and robbed of their legitimacy” (Münch, 2014).

As the global educational market is increasingly dominated by only a few global suppliers that sell their services to the OECD and interested countries (Lohmann, & Rilling, 2001) there is a danger that education worldwide will enter a phase of “McDonaldization” (Ritzer, 1993; Münch, 2014), having a large scale supply of standardized educational units, practices and procedures being delivered to a shapeless, de-contextualized, leveled field of educational practice that has been *bulldozed* by the power of those who decide what the knowledge society should look like (Labaree, 2014).

3. Romanian Discursive Practices on Educational Reform under the Regime Of PISA

Building on the analytical structures Münch (2014) and Labaree (2014) proposed to exploring the relationship between the discourse on education and the various approaches to national and international assessment exercises, are explored here the effects these testing exercises have on educational reform rhetoric in contexts of educational practice with historic ties to authoritarian, ultra-centralized practices of policy making, such as Romania’s. In our approach, the inquiry follows a reflective pattern similar to Labaree’s (2014) in paralleling the effects on educational practice of both national and international (PISA) assessment exercises; it also follows Münch’s (2014) analysis in looking at the relationship between what it is measured in the national assessment exercises and what is measured in the international ones, and to what effect on teaching, learning and schooling. It continues with exploring the massive increase in the frequency with which PISA results are being cited or referred to in public discourses on education and education reform in Romania, without any critical consideration.

3.1. National and International Assessment Exercises: Their Aims and Their Noted Effect on Conceptualizing Education

As widely noted in the educational research literature of the past few decades, the “accountability” movement prevailing over all systems of activity, and enjoying a wide popularity in political democracies worldwide, is generally explained by the principle stating that “keeping political leaders accountable is a basic tenet of democratic validity” (Meyer et al., 2014).

However, the practice of accountability in education ends up in judging an immensely vast diversity of actions which make up for our general notion of what constitutes “the work of educators”, based on predetermined indicators of efficiency that are “generally insensitive to the great variance of people, publics and places” (Meyer et al., 2014). It is the case with every nationally or internationally conducted assessment exercise, notes Labaree (2014) in his comparison of the intended and noted effects of such approaches to accounting for efficiency in education in the United States of America. He observes that, albeit rooted in different education policy narratives, the assessment under both PISA and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) umbrellas exercise a comparable shrinking effect on conceptual and procedural approaches to education in the U.S: “they both reduce the salient outcomes of schooling to learning, and they both reduce learning to the acquisition of economically useful skills (human capital). Both claim that their measures provide useful data for policy makers who want to increase the effectiveness of schools in producing human capital” (Labaree, 2014, apud. Meyer et al., 2014).

These comparable claims and effects on education which Labaree noted in the cases of PISA and NCLB approaches to educational accountability in the US can be easily traced in the discursive practices on accountability applied to education anywhere in the world. And Romania is no exception, if simply considering every wave of panic in the discourses on education policy that periodic participation in national and/or international assessment exercises generates. The statistical trajectory of the average percentage of students under-performing in the national exams like Bacalaureat, at the end of upper secondary, or Capacitate, at the end of lower secondary schooling, triggers an annual public display of a sense of decline in the quality of what is being learned in schools. As a general discursive practice this approach to speaking about education has very important implications over the meaning of education and the purpose(s) and function(s) of schooling. By focusing the narrative on education to the historicity of national exams, this discursive practice is very efficiently prompting an altered meaning of education and manages to reduce the functions traditionally assigned to schools. Education is understood as learning the tested curriculum, whereas schools are deemed more or less efficient deliverers of the knowledge ascribed to those parts of curriculum being tested. It also highlights certain knowledge (i.e. mathematical reasoning and literacy) as somehow directly indicative of the worth of learning in schools. This type of publicly endorsed reductionism in national approaches to understanding and positioning assessment in education functions as an efficient springboard for the claims PISA has introduced in the discourse about educational efficiency, when insisting it supports a measurement of the “set of cognitive skills that graduates will need in order to be productive workers anywhere in the advanced world” (Meyer et al., 2014). And who can overlook this new and very powerful argument surfacing a global perspective on what constitutes knowledge deemed economically relevant? Certainly not anyone living in economically challenged contexts of educational practice like the one in Romania!

When hopes for a better economical life meet promises of a growing, knowledge-based economy it is simply difficult to imagine any form of resistance or even desire to question the foundations of these promises. And yet, given that very little basis for justifying that what is measured is actually valid, except invoking the practical reasoning of these tests' researchers and the pre-tests of what works in most or all settings (Hopmann, 2008), it may be prudent to question the nature of these claims and to proceed with caution when going forward on this narrowing path to schooling.

3.2. Curriculum Relevant Versus Curriculum Irrelevant Assessment Exercises: Different Aims, Similar Intended Impact on Changing the Practice

Very much informed in the German didactic tradition, current Romanian practices of classroom teaching in reading, mathematics and sciences significantly differ from the Anglo-American models with which the tasks in the PISA tests for each area of knowledge comply with, to a significant degree. Testing for basic competences of understanding scientific concepts, processed and exemplary fields of application across sciences shapes a significant contrasting feature of the knowledge that PISA test, one that in the Romanian science curriculum, much like in the German science curriculum, is at best, incidentally and implicitly learned, but not explicitly taught (Münch, 2014).

To this effect, specific trajectories of teacher education and mechanisms of academic and professional recognition in Romania have an emphasizing effect on what limits approaches to project based, interdisciplinary learning within current classroom practices in lower secondary mainstream curriculum. Throughout initial, pre-service teacher education teachers' exposure to the conceptual and procedural tools of interdisciplinary approaches to school learning is very limited; later on, appointing teachers to posts in schools is a process relying heavily on the specialization they have written on their higher education diploma; and finally, teachers' very low workplace mobility and some specific features of in-service teacher education, like the tradition of attending subject-didactic groups (rom. *Cercul Pedagogic*) throughout an entire teaching career span, are framing coordinates of learning and professional development for teachers in the whole country, today. These formative tenets leave little room to individual initiatives beyond the confines of what is deemed a teachers' specialization. Teaching the subject-based curriculum is the professional task formally assigned to the teachers, yet, in a new pedagogical logic questioning young people's capacity to understand and efficiently respond to challenges across areas of subject knowledge, their work is suddenly deemed inefficient by measurements of something they were never in a position of teaching.

When looking at what happens with measurements of literacy and mathematical reasoning in PISA tests, Münch notices that what is being taught in German schools follows the pedagogical logic of German didactic traditions, prioritizing a holistic approach to schooling, favouring scientific specialization over "scientific literacy" (Münch, 2014). What is lost in the narrowed version of what is deemed economically relevant knowledge for the knowledge society, which OECD is so ambitiously claiming to test, is the wide scope of exploratory interests students could pursue in depth in the traditional approaches to teaching mathematical, literary and scientific contents in school (Münch, 2014). Any attempt to preserving the academic status of disciplinary knowledge in school comes at the cost of overburdening teachers, students and parents, sometimes leading to storms of protests especially among parents (Taffertshofer, 2007, apud. Münch, 2014). The Romanian experience is mirroring this over-

burdening effect on teachers, students and parents associated to the increased social pressure on learning as performance to tests, with an oversized emphasis on after-school private tuition (Rom. “pregătire în particular”) specifically focused on learning to the tests.

3.3. Shaping the Rhetoric on Education with Media Props

In the fast spreading of these new-found imperatives emphasizing an accountability approach to education that places human capital perspectives at its core of functions and value, the governmental explicit positioning in December 2013 of changing the Romanian Law of Education (1/2011) by a governmental decree proposing that the national examinations in 2019 be modelled on PISA’s testing examples constitutes the single most powerful example of the kind of uncritical, authoritarian manner of structuring the discourse in education policy, Romania generally welcomes with the various proposals pertaining to influential international agents.

Not even three years have past since this official positioning in the matter, that this undisputed accountability, human capital driven stance in education has perpetrated almost ubiquitously the discourses on education and education reform in Romania, framing what can now be named the rhetoric on education and education reform. Mass-media has played an unprecedentedly impactful role in structuring a register of panic on all related to education reform by prompting generalized and biased public representations of what the triggers of educational reform are (for instance, by augmenting and sensationalizing whatever could propel ratings – from audio-visual disclosures of dysfunctional classrooms or of individuals reacting to results in national examinations, to uncritical reports of momentous instantiations various individuals with a political agenda, willing to voice what can or should be done, in reforming education nationally).

This habitual approach to narrowing understanding of education reform to immediate, sensationalized, individual/expert perspective taking on formulating problems and exploring possible responses to them has, very likely, shaped to a significant degree the public representation of what to be expected in matters of educational reform. To this likely effect, having a powerful international agency promising to diagnose the cognitive skills leading to economical gain and to facilitate learning units able of delivering the exact promised results may just sound like the answer to all existing problems. An uncritical acceptance of what this proponent has to offer may seem like the right attitude in current general representations of what a reform in education is, except it is not!

Simply considering that action leading to economic prosperity is generally linked not to uncritical, generalized obedience to prescribed procedural modes, as it is to an increased individual work ethics, a pro-active quest for life-long learning and participation to informed, democratic decision making in the course of ongoing reforms, high standard professionalism and collective capacity building, propels our thinking that caution is advisable when choosing our arguments and our referents in matters of educational reform.

4. A Brief Discussion on Why Caution Is Required

In a rapidly changing world, it becomes increasingly obvious that efficiency in responding to complex social, cultural, economical and geopolitical problems is not a simple matter of statistics equating

economical growth predictors with students' individual success on cleverly crafted academic or non-academic tests. Despite the clarity of this simple observation, the enthusiasm of governmental and international agents' support to measures increasing accountability in education is overwhelming.

A number of systemic and political determinants could explain the rapid widespread of the 'human capital' approach to the rhetoric on education policy and reform in Romania.

Systemically, the traditional functions assigned to schools, consecrating a public trusteeship in perpetuating national cultural goods, have been secured by centralized curriculum decision-making and an emphasis on reproduction and delivery of curriculum as core of classroom practices. Delivery of curriculum required teachers specialized in the didactics of the various disciplines in the national curriculum. A culture of professional development placing most of its' praise on the masterful delivery of specialized knowledge to homogeneous cohorts of pupils in classrooms, framed a specific, linear pathway to professional qualification, maintaining the focus of teachers' professional learning on the didactic demands of their discipline. By this, the teachers' professional agency was specifically confined to performing a certain role, in certain circumstances and with certain expectations. Systemic, cultural or political changes and the dynamic, relational responses to such changes were not inscribed in the role.

Politically, intrusiveness in the matters of education has been a practice since the early days of the modern national school system, with censorship of learning contents and highly regulated classroom behaviors as common reinforcing mechanism of this general practice. With such systemic and political tenets, it is not difficult to understand why the education rhetoric in Romania most commonly responds to external pressures prompting paths of educational reform (nowadays charged with the promise of economical relevance), with a habitual lack of inquiry, other than "what should we do to put this change in motion?".

What it is stressed here as concerning is not simply the fact that *there is* an economical rationale informing decision-making at various levels of curriculum and education policy in Romania. Instead, it is stressed that a rationale which is *exclusive, lacking contextual specificity* and is generally *uncritically* accepted as the new measure of all things in education is dangerous, especially when systemic and political traditions do not favor a quick rebuttal, in the eventual realization that one is needed.

Completely left out of the scope of consideration in the current, human capital rhetoric in education reform is the concern for *collective capacity building*. Whilst placing the focus of all educational concerns on individuals better performing on tests and, hopefully, improving their competence and skills set, it is becoming more and more difficult to define those sets of conceptual and procedural tools that will be most useful in responding to challenges of life decades from now.

5. Conclusion

In shaping the educational reform rhetoric, it has become a practice to rely solely on experts' practical reasoning of what it is to come and not on the dialogical, collective capacity building, aiming at identifying resources and capabilities to respond to locally relevant issues conducive of an improved quality of life, from a holistic perspective. To the effect of the latter, it may be mindful to caution against exclusive, narrowing discursive practices on educational reform.

Instead, it may prove more productive an increased consideration of, and collective work towards harmonizing the polyphony of voices and stances in education, from individual agents (teachers, students, parents, researchers) to collective ones (communities of professional practice, local communities etc.). And to this effect, it is important to highlight the imperative for relevant contributions from the educational research community towards empirical evidence for what, why and how the dynamic of the collaboration between all these agents could work for the benefit of educational reform.

References

- Biesta, G. (2009). Good education in an age of measurement: On the need to reconnect with the question of purpose in education. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, 21(1), 33–36.
- Ertl, H. (2006). Educational Standards and the Changing Discourse on Education: The Reception and Consequences of the PISA Study in Germany. *Oxford Review of Education*, 32(5), 619–634.
- Hopmann, S. T. (2008). No child, no school, no state left behind: Schooling in the age of accountability. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 40, 4, 417–456.
- Labaree, D. (2014). Let's measure what no one teaches: PISA, NCLB, and the shrinking aims of education. *Teachers College Record*, 116(9), 1-14.
- Lohmann, I., & Rilling, R. (Eds.) (2001). *Die verkaufte Bildung. Kritik und Kontroversen zur Kommerzialisierung von Schule, Weiterbildung, Erziehung und Wissenschaft*. Opladen: Leske + Budrich.
- Mahon, R. and S. McBride, eds. (2008). *The OECD and Transnational Governance*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
- Martens, K., Jakobi, A., J. (2010). Expanding and Intensifying Governance: The OECD in Education Policy. In *Mechanisms of OECD Governance: International Incentives for National Policy-making?*, edited by K. Martens and A. P. Jakobi, 163–179. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Meyer, H-D., Benavot, A. eds. (2013). *PISA, Power, and Policy. The Emergence of Global Educational Governance*. Oxford, UK: Symposium.
- Meyer, H., Trohler, D., Labaree, D. and Hutt, E. (2014). *Accountability: Antecedents, Power and Processes*. Retrieved from:
<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/73d5/16ac2b44a2ed4553d3e3e0b4b3cd07fb7e10.pdf>
- Münch, R. (2014) Education under the regime of PISA & Co.: Global standards and local traditions in conflict – The case of Germany. *Teachers College Record*, 116(9), 1–16.
- Ritzer, G. (1993). *The McDonaldization of society*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.
- Romanian Law of Education (1/2011). (2011). *Monitorul Oficial*. 18/10.01.2011
- Taffertshofer, B. (2007). Altraum Gymnasium. *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 63(68), 37.
- Takayama, K. (2008). The Politics of International League Tables: PISA in Japan's Achievement Crisis Debate. *Comparative Education*, 44(4), 387–407.
- Tröhler, D., Popkewitz, T., & Labaree, D. F. (2011). *Schooling and the making of citizens in the long nineteenth century: Comparative visions*. New York: Routledge.