

PISA results

LIFELONG CONSEQUENCES?

Jean-Luc Heller

Die von PISA getesteten 15-Jährigen müssen trotz schwachen Abschneidens bei der Lesekompetenz keine »lost generation« werden. Wenn 47 Prozent der in Deutschland Getesteten nur einen Literacy-Level besser abschneiden, dann wäre das Land der Dichter und Denker bereits so gut wie die Briten. Gelänge dies gar 79 Prozent, dann wären gar die »siegreichen« Finnen eingeholt. Also alles halb so schlimm? PISA-Forscher Heller von der OECD erläutert, welche Schlüsse für das lebenslange Lernen (nicht) gezogen werden können und welche Studien in Zusammenarbeit mit der OECD geplant sind, die helfen, die Zusammenhänge zwischen den vorliegenden PISA-Ergebnissen und den Fähigkeiten heutiger und künftiger Erwachsener besser zu bewerten.

Facing PISA results, two approaches can be considered. The one which has produced the most numerous developments so far consists in questioning the determinants of such results. One can explore individual or social characteristics of the students, school organisation or the educational system as a whole to identify the specific features that can be related to the results.

A number of different factors can play a role in the observed level of proficiency of the 15 year-olds surveyed by PISA, such as personal motivation for reading, the impact of the family or of the social context, but also the organisation of schools, teaching practices and expectations, the contents and the duration of educational programs, as well as the resources for learning, early or late specialisation and tracking.

The PISA results are an invitation for the debate and for developing the re-

search rather than conclusive judgments on the miracle recipe to improve the educational performance. It is worth noting that any policy agreed would not impact on the results before years. Those who are now 8 or 10 years of age will be assessed in 2009 by PISA; they should fall under the scope of new education policies.

On the other hand, the youth surveyed by PISA in 2000 are now 18 years of age. Since the first survey, three generations – supposed to perform at the same, low, level – have passed.

That is why a different approach can be envisaged. It consists in thinking of the consequences of the established – bad, in the case of Germany – situation and of any possible remedies, which would be more curative than preventive. Even riskier and very speculative, this approach does not lack interest, first because of the actual existence of these low-performing generations, and also because of

what is really measured by PISA. The acquisition of literacy is a lifelong process which takes place not just at school or through formal learning, but also through interaction with peers, colleagues and larger communities. Rather than assessing the possession of specific knowledge based on school curricula, PISA assesses the students' ability to continue learning and to use their knowledge in real life by emphasising the ability to retrieve information, understand it, reflect upon it and relate it to a variety of situations in which they come across written material. The point at issue is precisely that of the basic foundations for the learning process and further improvement over the lifespan. PISA results for Germany reflect a serious problem as they show that a large proportion of the young population lacks the necessary grounding allowing to further progress. This is of particular concern as education and training are largely based on written stimuli from which it is difficult to escape. Programmes allowing students to fill their basic education gaps should be envisaged for compensation in the future. They might be difficult in the absence of those elementary skills.

Absence of elementary skills

Reading literacy is described by five levels of proficiency. Each represents what students can do at that level – and cannot do below it. Students performing below Level 1 are not capable of handling the most basic types of reading that PISA seeks to measure; therefore they may face serious difficulties in the future. Even at Level 1, students may not acquire the necessary literacy skills to benefit from educational opportunities in an adequate way. Without the adoption of specific policies, this situation is quite troublesome for Germany, in light of the extensive evidence that in later life it be-

comes difficult to compensate for learning gaps in basic education. In the case of Germany, not only the mean score, but also the distribution of the results is questioned, with 10% of a generation performing below Level 1 and 13% performing at Level 1. It is clear that any policy targeting the current generations and not only the future ones should be focused on these low-performing groups. The top 5% group is performing at exactly the same level as the Japanese and at about the OECD average level. It is in respect of the medium and especially the lowest-performing groups that Germany falls under the level of the reference countries and under the OECD average.

How the performance of 15 year-old Germans should improve for them to reach the level of the best-performing young Finns, being measured not only by an average score, but according to the five PISA levels of proficiency? To equalise the distributions by level between the two countries, 79% of each generation of young Germans should improve their respective result at one PISA level, which is quite considerable. To reach the levels attained in the United Kingdom, 47% of the young Germans should gain one level of proficiency. These figures illustrate the considerable effort to be made.

PISA also provides significant information on the results achieved in terms of immigration status. On the reading literacy scale, foreign-born students get a lower score than native students. The difference is less noticeable, but still significant, between native students and first-generation students (who were born in the country, but whose parents were born abroad). Instead, the two gaps are much higher in Germany: they represent more than one proficiency level in reading literacy. The performance of students who were born in Germany of foreign parents is only marginally better than the performance of students who were born abroad themselves and both groups perform significantly

worse than native students, which is a totally different pattern to the one found, say, in Canada. Similarly, when the language spoken at home most of the time is different from German, the score on reading literacy falls dramatically, largely exceeding the OECD average. In addition to the question addressed to the education system, this targets a specific policy for these groups, around 15% of the generation for non-native and first-generation students, in danger of severe marginalization all along the lifespan. It must be acknowledged that other indicators on the competitiveness or the productivity of the workforce in Germany are not fully in line with these results. One could think that all the consequences of this denoted low level of literacy, maybe a relatively recent phenomenon, are not yet expanded to the whole society. The other explanation could be that other factors are playing a role in closing the gap. Training in working situations, acquiring skills and competencies through other ways of socialisation may still have an impact. If several things are predictable and pre-determined by the proficiency acquired at the age of 15, a number of experiences can occur, and do occur, after that age.

A number of experiences do occur after the age of 15

Anyway, these scenarios need confirmation. The next waves of PISA, respectively in 2003, mainly concerning the domain of mathematical literacy with a follow-up on reading literacy, then in 2006 with a focus, among other domains, on scientific literacy, and finally in 2009, for a new in-depth assessment of reading literacy, might reveal trends and progress, but they might also nuance the general picture. Other follow-up tools would be of interest to estimate the consequences of the PISA results in the transition process: within the school system and

from school to work. This is the project of a longitudinal component for PISA (known as PISA-L) in which Germany is involved. The framework is currently under construction to survey year after year the youth already surveyed by PISA, with a possible starting point according to the PISA cycle in 2003 or in 2006. The impact on various pathways of the initial proficiency levels combined with other background variables will be illustrated.

Under construction: longitudinal component for PISA

The other tool is the direct assessment of adult competencies partly based on common assessment items and methods. This is the ultimate information according to which it can be judged how other forms of learning and socialisation, work-based and socially directed could possibly have compensated for the initial education gaps. The project is a challenging one because of the heterogeneity of the adult population, the diversity of contexts and experiences, the wide range of competencies and skills to assess beyond academic or technical competencies, including the ways of acting, using tools and functioning in society. Discussions are launched within OECD on future plans regarding such internationally comparative adult skills assessment surveys.



Jean-Luc Heller forscht in der Indicators and Analysis Division im Directorate for Education der OECD, Paris.

Kontakt: jean-luc.heller@oecd.org