

The truth about education policy is that it's based on a myth^[1]

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Source: Forbes

Format: Article

Publication Date: 29 Jul 2020

AVAILABILITY

Access online^[2]

EXCERPTS

Education policy around the world is built on the belief that success in international tests translates into economic growth – but the truth is this is a myth.

For almost two decades, policy makers have held up success in global comparison tests as the yardstick by which school improvement can be measured.

And this in turn has been fuelled by the assumption that there is a direct link between a strong showing in the tests and economic growth.

But a new study argues that the data underlying this assumption is flawed, and that rather than rising achievement in test results leading to greater economic growth, researchers found no connection between them at all.

Chief among the international comparisons are the PISA tests (Programme for International Student Assessment) administered by the OECD, a triennial measure of achievement in English, maths and science among 15-year-olds in almost 80 countries and economies in the last round (in 2018).

Publication of the results is normally accompanied by a ritual response, depending on whether a country's overall placing has gone up or down.

Sliding down the tables is held to be a sign that teachers are doing a bad job, while rising up is a vindication of whichever shiny new initiative has been championed by those in power.

But the use of PISA as a measure of success is largely based on analysis showing the economic benefits of improving scores.

According to Andreas Schleicher, director of education at the OECD, and based on work by Eric Hanusek from the Hoover Institute and Ludgar Woessmann at the University of Munich, claims that raising PISA scores by 25 points would add 7% to GDP over the course of a century.

But a new study sets out to demolish this claim by pointing out that the data underpinning it is flawed.

According to Hikaru Komatsu of National Taiwan University and Jeremy Rappleye of Kyoto University, the original analysis makes the mistake of comparing performance in the tests with economic performance over the same period.

However, as Komatsu and Rappleye point out, it will take several decades for students who take the PISA tests at 15 to enter the workforce and make a significant contribution to economic growth.

In their own analysis, comparing performance on PISA tests in a certain period with economic performance over a subsequent period, Komatsu and Rappleye found virtually no relationship between the two.

A subsequent study looked at data on skills across the workforce, and again found 'virtually no relationship' with economic growth. At best, the level of skills in the workforce explained, at best, 4% of the GDP variation between countries.

But even though Komatsu and Rappleye published their first critique of the use of PISA scores in 2016, and work demolishing the link between test scores and economic growth dates at least as far back as 2006, PISA's hold on policy makers' imaginations has, if anything, strengthened.

As Diane Ravitch, professor at New York University and former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Education, has pointed out, test scores are meaningless, at least as far as economic growth is concerned (it was Prof Ravitch's blog that drew my attention to Komatsu and Rappleye's latest study).

This should come as no surprise to those familiar with the field. As long ago as 2001, former World Bank economist Lant Pritchett, now at Oxford University, published research finding no link between increases in educational attainment and economic growth.

Instead of rising levels of education leading to greater wealth, the opposite seems to be true: rising levels of wealth lead to higher levels of

education. It's not wealth that follows education, but education that follows wealth.

And yet, despite two decades of evidence, global enthusiasm for PISA remains undimmed. And policy makers continue to pursue a goal that, in the end, will give them nothing but bragging rights.

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