

## Education Review

Reseñas Educativas



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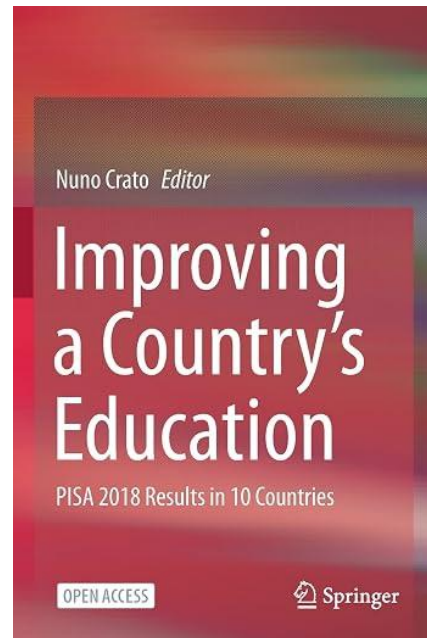
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The release of results from PISA 2018 in December 2019 once again triggered the usual cycle of self-reflection among nations, with celebrations for countries with high results, concern among declining nations, and debates on what really affects student performance. Nuno Crato's edited volume, *Improving a Country's Education: PISA 2018 Results in 10 Countries*, makes a timely and significant intervention. Rather than

engaging with the extensive literature on the governance of PISA testing and the methodology of its measurements, the book sets out a more concrete task: identifying aspects of education systems across different countries that contribute to either progress or stagnation in PISA performance. This comparative collection achieves both breadth and depth by bringing together scholars with in-depth knowledge of education systems in 10 different national contexts. In this review, we argue that the significance of the volume lies not merely in its comparative scope, but in demonstrating how the interpretation of assessment data is inseparable from curriculum design, institutional capacity, and policy choices within specific national contexts.

The analytical handbook is organized in the chapter synthesis, which states that success education is primarily shaped by the coherence of curriculum-based knowledge, quality learning, as well as the evaluation of systems of accuracy and

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<sup>1</sup> This book is open access at <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-030-59031-4>

openness. The various authors in this edited volume challenge the assumption that an increase in financial investment will by itself result in the achievement of improvement. Instead, emphasis is placed on how the educational process is structured and implemented. This argument is supported by the integration of PISA data with the evaluation of national systems: the Chilean SIMCE, the UK National Student Database, and the evaluation of the Portuguese national framework, among others. Overall, the main argument put forward in the book is that case studies of countries collectively show that educational achievement is not shaped by isolated policy measures, but rather by alignment between curriculum, assessment, and institutional conditions.

A similar emphasis on systemic coherence is seen in the case of Estonia. There it is shown that higher education performance levels can be achieved alongside equality when institutional harmony is maintained through school autonomy, self-evaluation, and curriculum-based competency frameworks. Despite the limited financial resources, Estonia's experience shows that consistency in design systems only plays a decisive role in the form of excellence at a time of equality in student achievement (see chapter by G. Tire, pp. 101–120).

The Finnish case adds to the complexity of the issues by showing that changes in performance cannot be explained simply through design policy. The observed decline in PISA achievement was related to more social and motivational factors broadly, including demographic shifts and declining reading engagement among male students, not due to failures in the structured curriculum (see chapter by A. K. Ahonen, pp. 121–136). Generally speaking, this case shows that the achievement on PISA tests should not be interpreted as an indicator of direct policy success, but rather as a context-dependent reflection on how an education system translates policy intent into practice.

In contrast, the Polish case demonstrates the fragility of evidence-based reforms that emerges when political continuity is disrupted. Although previous reforms significantly improved PISA performance, the setbacks since 2016 suggest that empirical success is not sustainable. This case confirms that the effectiveness of policy reform depends not only on evidence, but also on the ability to maintain political support and institutional stability over time (see chapter by M. Jakubowski, pp. 137–158).

Portugal's case illustrates how harmony among curriculum reform, the development of teacher professionalism development, and evaluation can translate policy coherence into measurable improvements in student performance. As the only OECD country to show consistent progress in all PISA domains between 2000 and 2018, Portugal provides evidence that consistently embedded long-term reforms by means of structural policies rather than isolated interventions are key to the improvement of education (see chapter by J. Marôco, pp. 159–174).

The case of the United States further strengthens this argument by illustrating the limited impact of policy-based reforms without the existence of systemic coherence. Despite decades of increased financial investment and

central government policies, student achievement remains unchanged, while educational disparities persist. This disappointing result suggests that increased investment will not result in significant improvements in educational achievement if there is no alignment among institutional structures, assessments, and curricula (see chapter by E. A. Hanushek, pp. 227–247).

On the methodological side, one of the most significant contributions of *Improving a Country's Education* lies in the triangulation of international and national data. Although PISA provides a cross-sectional portrait of student performance, it is in an inherent way limited in its capacity to reveal the causal relationships between intervention policy and educational achievement. By integrating PISA trends with national longitudinal data and expert knowledge, this book offers a larger, nuanced and contextually sensitive understanding of the education of change. At the same time, the limitations of an approach that relies solely on large-scale assessment data are apparent, reinforcing the need for careful interpretation in comparative policy analysis.

Viewed as one contribution to a wider body of literature, this book occupies an important position between criticism of PISA and the uncritical acceptance of policy arguments based on achievement test data. The various arguments put forward in the text differ from the criticisms put forward by Meyer and Benavot (2013) and Sellar and Lingard (2014). The authors adopt a more optimistic stance toward the utility of assessment data in analyzing education policy. Nonetheless, they are still less ideologically driven when compared to Sahlberg's (2011) critique of the Global Education Reform Movement.

Nonetheless, this book is not without some limitations. The focus is on the context of the OECD and East Asia which are performing well. Generalization of the contributors' main points is limited, especially for countries operating under different institutional and socio-economic conditions. For example, efforts to adopt PISA-like tasks in the Indonesian context—such as the development of COVID-19-based mathematics tasks aligned with the newly introduced Minimum Competency Assessment—illustrate the difficulty of translating PISA principles into educational settings that the volume does not directly examine (Nusantara et al., 2021).

*Improving Education in One Country* provides a rigorous example of the need for studying education comparatively. Its strength lies not only in its depth but also in its ability to illuminate the complex relationships between evidence, policy, and politics. More importantly, this book shows that the success of data-driven reforms depends not only on the evidence available, but also on how that evidence is interpreted, communicated, and defended within a particular political and institutional context. This insight is particularly significant because it highlights how knowledge, evidence, and policy are constructed and mobilized in educational discourse and practice. This book is therefore particularly relevant for researchers, policymakers, and educators seeking a larger, critical, and contextually sensitive understanding of the large role assessment may play in shaping education reform.

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### About the Editor

**Nuno Crato** is a professor of mathematics and statistics at the University of Lisbon. He was Portuguese Minister of Education from 2011 to 2015. During his tenure, compulsory schooling was extended, dropout rates were cut in half, and Portuguese students achieved the best results ever on PISA and TIMSS. An active researcher, science writer, and educational essayist, he has received various honours, namely from the European Mathematical Society and the European Commission. His many accomplishments are available at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nuno\\_Crato](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nuno_Crato)



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