

What does PISA say about Brazilian students?

A discussion on the mathematics educators' endorsement of the assessment

The growing strength of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), since its first edition in 2000, and its remarkable influence on the curricula practiced in schools in different countries have been recognized in several studies. Despite consistent criticism of the tests, from their conception to the calculation of scores, a growing number of countries join the exam, thus increasing its validation, reinforced by local and international media (Zhang, 2020; Mons, 2009). Addey et al. (2017) explain that, besides the economic and political international pressures and the homogenizing tendencies of globalization, adhesion to PISA is also driven by internal motivations to validate local educational policies in progress or justify the need for new reforms.

Although not a member of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Brazil has been engaged in PISA since the first meetings for its conception in 1997 (Castro, 2016). With the announced goal of achieving PISA scores similar to those of OECD countries, Brazil developed its national assessment system (SAEB), applying Mathematics and Portuguese tests in all public schools, since 2005. Governments with different political alignments maintained this policy, which was consolidated in the National Education Plan (2014-2024). As in other countries, large-scale assessment has generated a process of curricular narrowing, with an increase in the school workload of mathematics and Portuguese language, to the detriment of other subjects. Studies show that in several regions and schools, the teaching of mathematics is test-oriented in an effort to reach the goals set by the Plan and by the governments (Hypolito & Jorge, 2020).

A significant body of research indicates that PISA is not a good instrument to assess students' knowledge and skills (Zhao, 2020). More than 40% of the Brazilian students who participate in the mathematics literacy exam have been ranked below level 1, and, therefore, their skills are not even evaluated. Furthermore, we argue that the contexts of the published items of the math tests, which are supposed to evaluate the ability to model and solve real-life problems (Stacey & Turner, 2015), are mainly unfamiliar to most 15-year-old Brazilians who make up the population assessed by PISA.

However, the papers presented in the events promoted by the Brazilian Society of Mathematics Education usually portray PISA as a legitimate instrument for evaluating the students' mathematical literacy. Therefore, using those meetings' proceedings as sources, we intend to examine the grounds for such consent.

References

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