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Leaning between conspiracy and hegemony: OECD, UNESCO, and the tower of PISA

by Larry Kuehn

It is tempting to believe in conspiracies, to think that events have unfolded because powerful forces have secretly and behind-the-scenes carried out an action that had significant social and political impact. Enough stories have been proven later—the Iran-Contra scandal, CIA engagement in overturning elected governments—that one must at least keep an open mind about the possibilities. But international standardized tests—isn't that going a bit far? Could the PISA exam (Programme for International Student Assessment) be a result of a conspiracy?

The PISA exam is the beginning of the testing program of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The OECD is a club for the thirty major industrial economies, originally made up of the countries of Western Europe, North America and Japan. In recent years, some of the emerging industrial countries, such as Korea and post-NAFTA Mexico have been added.

More than a decade ago, the OECD began a project called the OECD Education Indicators. The central purpose of the Education Indicators was to provide cross-national comparisons about education systems. The OECD has published since 1992 an annual report of indicators called *Education at a Glance*. One of the objectives from the beginning was to develop “performance indicators” as a key part of the system. This phrase is put in quotation marks here because it stands for an entire ideology and technology of control systems being imposed on public services in general and education in particular.

Performance indicators as a technology of control

The major global corporations that have both production and sales in multiple countries have developed control mechanisms that are based in information technology. Inventories can be maintained on a “just-in-time” basis, keeping down the costs of production. Information about sales can be aggregated quickly, providing indications of the relative success of different parts of the system, and giving feedback that things are going well or need to change. Both of these depend on technology-intensive communication networks providing information on a distributed basis, both to the corporate centre and to the various operations that may be located in a number of countries. This information is supposed to be used to alter aspects of production or sales that don't conform to the need to produce profits.

The OECD Education Indicators project is conceptually based on this model. In its initial stages it identified three aspects of an education production model applied to education—inputs, process and outputs. You can already see from the get-go how the source of the model influences how one thinks about the process and objectives of education.

The ideology of the globalized production model places a priority on “outputs.” Profits are the valued outcomes of a capitalist economic system and an entire industry and technology—accounting and auditing—is in place to identify what those profits are and to give confidence to the shareholders that their return on investment is being honestly reported. However, we have seen with the scandals around Enron, Worldcom and many other major companies that even with something as concrete as dollars and profits, it is possible for accountants and auditors to fiddle with the results and hide the realities.

The auditing conception of accounting to shareholders has been widely adopted as a method of measuring accountability for government services. The claim is made—rightly—that citizens have a right to know if the government is doing what they want it to do and to use that information to make changes, if desired. The method that has been generally adopted is to try to create an equivalent to the accounting to shareholders. The central mechanism for this is the creation of “performance indicators” that can be measured, narrowing the objectives that can be set to those measurable in some concrete way. As an example, the Deputy Minister of Education in British Columbia has said, “if it can’t be measured, it can’t be managed.” Where this leads is exemplified by the BC Ministry of Education performance indicator for curriculum: no curriculum document will be more than five years old. The quality or the relevance of the curriculum are difficult to measure in some standard way, but the number of years since publication is easy to determine. Quality and relevance can never be fixed elements. They change as the social context changes and as one set of ideas gains acceptability over another set. The best that can be done to determine them is to have an ongoing dialogue among citizens, teachers and students—the essence of what would be done in a democratic education system.

In contrast to a democratic dialogue approach where a school community defines goals, the performance indicator system is defined externally to the participants in the education system. Both the framework and the content are determined by bureaucrats or “experts.” Under pressure from auditors-general, most governments at both the provincial and federal level in Canada have adopted a model of performance standards and performance indicators for public services. These are promoted as systems of “accountability,” and are intended to give assurances to the public that public resources are being used effectively on public programs. These systems are supposed to give direction to the day to day work that public employees carry out or that is contracted by government.

Sounds sensible, doesn’t it? But take another look. Do either the public or the employees actually doing the work have a role in defining what the performance outcomes should be or what kind of performance indicators should be used to evaluate the services? The claim for public involvement is usually based on politicians being elected to represent the public in the process. Seldom, though, do politicians have more than a cursory role in the process—beyond mandating it through legislation. They are on the sidelines nearly as much as those delivering or receiving a service. It is generally a technocratic process whose shape is driven by the need to produce numbers that are supposed to mean something about the services being provided.

In the education system, standardized tests provide a way to produce the numbers. Some tests, like the PISA exam or the SAIP (the Canadian School Achievement Indicators Program), are aimed at comparing education systems on an international basis (PISA) and national basis (SAIP). Other exams, such as the Foundation Skills Assessment (FSA) in BC combine comparing system results between schools and school districts with reports to parents on the performance of individual students. Despite the limits of what these tests tell us, private groups such as the market-promoting Fraser Institute and its clones take these figures and produce

league tables, rankings of schools according to the tests, much like a sports league. They reduce education to a race for competitive results rather than the growth and development of each and every young person, regardless of their abilities and circumstances.

While standardized exams seem to produce an “objective” measure, it is important to remember that these are socially constructed, based on a set of assumptions that are generally implicit and seldom debated or widely understood. Even the accounting model on which they are patterned is based on a set of socially-constructed “standards” called GAAP (generally accepted accounting practices). These are developed by “experts,” much as the PISA exam was developed by an international group with experience in this kind of audit testing. Reports of the early discussions among the PISA developers shed interesting light on the underlying assumptions. They talked about the difficulty of finding elements of the practice of literacy that have consistency across the many cultures and languages of the countries involved in the testing program. All forms of literature—poetry, fiction, as well as journalism and other forms of non-fiction—are imbedded in a culture and language, so one cannot assume that simply translating will really produce comparable testing experiences. The one form of writing that they did think carried across cultures was computer manuals—presumably incomprehensible in any language.

Developing an international test involves complex negotiations, based on assumptions rooted in a social context, culture and language of the test developers. It is also imbedded in a particular way of knowing, one that values the appearance of “objectivity” with a heavy emphasis on numbers. None of this complexity is obvious when the results are reported as a single number that fits nicely into a chart or league table. Seldom are the assumptions and structure of the testing model exposed to public view.

So where is the conspiracy?

You are right. What has been described so far is really a case of hegemony, not a conspiracy. Hegemony because performance indicators and finding numbers to define how the standards are met is pervasive. We see it in all areas of government, promoted by auditor-general offices and ideologically by those who want to limit government and make whatever remains of government look as much like the market system as possible. It is a way of understanding that is hegemonic because it is so dominant that it is invisible, and seems to many like “common sense.”

How did this system come to dominate education? To a large degree, because it is an adaptation to the education context of a widely used control system. But widely used systems don’t come out of nowhere. They serve particular interests and are built on specific decisions by real people who have access to the resources to carry them out. That is where the conspiracy comes in.

This story about the OECD and UNESCO is drawn from a presentation by Dr. Albert Tuijnman at an Edudata seminar in Vancouver in March of 2001.¹ Dr. Tuijnman worked for the OECD centre on education and was an author of the first three issues of the OECD’s *Education at a Glance* indicator reports.

The key to finding the conspiracy (not Dr. Tuijnman’s term) is to know that two groups were competitors for carrying out comparative international education studies—the OECD and UNESCO (United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization). This competition developed in the early 1980s, when Ronald Reagan was US president and Margaret Thatcher the British Prime Minister.

The context was a report from an early international testing program, the Second International Maths and Science Study (SIMSS). It showed unfavourable results for US students compared to those from a number of other countries. These results were used to declare a crisis (always a precursor to change) through the publication of the report called *A Nation at Risk*, claiming that the US had adopted “unilateral disarmament” in education. Failure to lead the world in science and math results was considered to be a disaster in the US, similar to the shock of being beaten by the Russians in sending the first human into space in an earlier decade. *A Nation at Risk* kicked off a new direction in international testing studies. Until this point, the international studies had not been based on a “horse race” approach. Rather, they provided data that academics used to explain differences by comparing tested achievement to curriculum, school resources, teaching approaches and home and social factors, reflecting the reality of the complex that is education.

The US and British governments wanted studies that focused on accountability and performance, measuring “value for money,” as accountants understand those terms. They were not interested in the “input” and “process” elements, but in the outputs produced, as determined by testing. It is a compliance audit approach drawn from business.² It is sometimes called a “loose/tight” form of management, where outputs (standards independent of time or context) are set centrally and are measured by tests (the tight part), while those working in the system in theory determine how to reach the externally set goals. Detailed knowledge of the social context and the pedagogical and other educational practices are not of significance from this perspective. We’ll tell you what to do and you figure out how to do it, is the message—whoever the students are and whatever the resources we give you to carry out the job. And we will test and publish the results to let everyone know who has the fastest horses.

The Reagan and Thatcher governments wanted UNESCO to carry out these output performance indicator types of studies, but UNESCO refused. UNESCO is governed by a general assembly in which each of the more than 150 countries that belong have one vote, regardless of how much they contribute in financing. The cold war was still on and the US and UK saw UNESCO as dominated by leftists and developing countries, so they withdrew in 1986, taking their money with them.

They turned to the OECD as the other international agency that might be used to carry out the mandate for the kind of statistics that the Reagan and Thatcher governments wanted. However, when they went to the OECD, it did not immediately adopt their position either. Neither Germany nor France—both still members of UNESCO—wanted to see the OECD carry out what they saw as suspect studies. The US and UK then threatened to pull out of the OECD education committee as well—a threat that led the other countries to capitulate and agree to develop international indicators of education systems.

The OECD *Education at a Glance* indicators were first published in 1992, based on the limited data that was available at the time. Much of the information was not really in comparable form. The only outcome data was from the second international math test that was already ten years old. This was included because of the political imperative to have output data and its dated nature was used to argue for creating a system to collect outcome data on an ongoing basis.

Although other groups within the OECD education structure were aimed at understanding broader system outcomes, the group designated as Network A was concerned with outputs defined as student performance on tests. The work of this group has been financed primarily by the US and it is this group that developed the PISA exams. These exams are to be given on a

three-year cycle to provide ongoing outcome data to feed the OECD indicators and allowing for the ongoing ranking of countries in the horse race, winners and losers approach.

As Dr. Albert Tuijnman says of the PISA exam:

...when the OECD designs such a project it's not driven by scholarly interests, not driven by an interest in academic analysis or hypothesis or data analysis; that means also of course that the data collection itself is not an elaborate data collection that IEA used to do in terms of curriculum analysis and so on; it's a different type of approach....The main interest is simply to know where the systems achieve rather than explaining why they achieve like they do.³

The conflict between UNESCO and the OECD reappears in 1997, with UNESCO proposing to set up a World Education Indicators project. The OECD indicators project, of course, provided comparative information among participating OECD countries, which constitute only thirty of the more than 150 countries that belong to UNESCO. A UNESCO project could also have provided an opportunity for a different approach to indicators, one which is based on getting data to understand relationships within education, not just outcomes.

However, the OECD won out again. Funding from the World Bank that had been intended for financing the UNESCO World Education Indicators project got diverted to the OECD. The US approach to marketing its OECD indicators approach to countries beyond the OECD was to make it seem like the only game in town and the logical way to understand education systems. As an example, the US took the members of the newly established Education Forum of APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation) to Washington, DC in 1997 to be briefed on the OECD Education Indicators. The APEC Education Forum is made up of senior officials in ministries of education, as are the policy bodies within the OECD that define the direction of the outcome measures through the PISA exam.

As Harvey Weiner of the Canadian Teachers' Federation told a conference co-sponsored by UNESCO and Education International, "Globalization has narrowed the scope of education, and hence the individual's objectives to economic targets: best marks, best jobs, best salaries." (*EI Newsletter*, December 2002) The OECD, its Centre for Education, Research and Innovation and the OECD indicators project have all played key roles in this narrowing of education to focus on economic targets.

Dr. Tuijnman's evaluation of the impact of the OECD indicator frameworks is that they have "produced over the last ten years a very strong tendency to demean." The impact of this has been for "education systems to become more homogeneous, to become more similar." He also points out that "there are very few critical voices outside."

"A very strong tendency to demean" seems like a good assessment of the impact of most of the program of bringing compliance audit techniques from business into the work of education—whether by the OECD, the Council of Ministers of Education Canada or the Bush administration with its "No Child Left Behind" testing program.

What if UNESCO had been responsible for an international evaluation program?

Could testing and educational statistics have been different if UNESCO had won out over the OECD both in the '80s and the '90s, when the US and the UK and then the World Bank (also controlled by the US) opted for the OECD over UNESCO?

Perhaps not. As described at the beginning of this article, there is a hegemonic conception of performance measures and outputs that dominates discourse on how government is evaluated. It is an element of globalization, of building institutions that promote a particular form of development that is subservient to corporate global interests and brings the technology of control of business into education. It is not a system of democratic dialogue, but one of measurable objectives set by senior officials and evaluated by tools of quantification. And because of the dominant economic position of the US, any international system might end up following the ideology and dictates of the US.

A description from the UNESCO web page of a publication issued February 17, 2003, shows just how much UNESCO has been brought into the fold of the OECD's human capital approach to understanding education. The World Education Indicators has even been combined to be a UNESCO/OECD programme:

Financing Education Investments and Returns is the third in a series of publications that seeks to analyse the education indicators developed through the UNESCO/OECD World Education Indicators (WEI) programme. The report examines both the investments and returns to education and human capital. It begins by looking at the results of a specially commissioned study of the impact of human capital on economic growth in WEI countries that shows new findings in comparison with OECD countries. It also sets out the context for trends in educational attainment as well as current levels and future prospects of educational participation and expenditure in WEI countries.⁴

On the other hand, things might have been different. One sees an immediate difference in looking at the names of the two organizations. While the OECD's name is limited to "economic," UNESCO includes education, science and culture, clearly a much broader scope than that of the OECD.

The possibilities of what could have been is reflected in the breadth of the goals that were defined for education in UNESCO's Delors Report on education.⁵ It identified four goals: learning to live together, learning to be, learning to do and learning to know. The OECD, its indicators project and the PISA exams are really only interested in the "learning to do" element, the development of human capital for the economic system. A valid assessment system would not just focus on one element, but would be concerned with all four aspects of learning, some of which do not lend themselves at all to testing as a means of assessment.

In fact, there still may be opportunities. According to Albert Tuijnman, the "OECD is no longer the only game in town." He is referring to the new UNESCO Institute of Statistics that opened in Montreal in 2001. It has a particular focus on monitoring progress on achieving the *Education for All* objectives, with significant financing by the Canadian federal government. The *Education for All* campaign is an international effort to ensure that by 2015 all children around the globe have access to at least primary education—an objective that could be achieved much sooner, of course, if only a share of the money spent on bombs were devoted to education.

Indeed, if we accept the claim of the World Social Forum that other worlds are possible, so must other forms of educating and assessing also be possible. The challenge is for us to imagine these, and to rebuild our institutions to make them real.

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Notes:

¹ Tuijnman, A. (2001). Transcription of a presentation to an Edudata Canada Seminar on May 2, 2001 at the University of British Columbia.

² Elliott, J. (2002). "The Impact of Intensive 'Value for Money' Performance Auditing in Educational Systems."

³ Tuijnman, 2001. p. 12.

⁴ UNESCO web page. <http://portal.unesco.org/>, downloaded March 23, 2003.

⁵ Delors, Jacques (Chairman), (1996). *Learning the Treasure Within: Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century*. France: UNESCO Publishing. p. 97.