

GERM infects education globally

Larry Kuehn, Director of Research and Technology, BC Teachers' Federation

Pasi Sahlberg is an educator from Finland who has written extensively about how Finland's education system comes out on top of the PISA test results. Ironically, Finland succeeds *despite* rejecting the formula for school reform recommended by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) that runs the PISA exams. Sahlberg calls the system Finland does **not** use, but is imposed on the rest of us, GERM. GERM is the acronym for Global Education Reform Movement.

GERM in English is a pun in the way that Sahlberg uses it. Germs are the cause of sickness and Sahlberg is suggesting that the Global Education Reform Movement is an illness in education systems that are following the GERM directions.

The source of the illness is, in its essence, abandoning education's role of creating and recreating social and cultural good and building social cohesion. In its place, education is seen primarily as preparing workers to compete in a global economy.

The mechanisms used to propagate GERM and infect education systems globally are at least three: testing, technology, and corporate capitalism. Each of these three elements will be described in their separate impact, as well as how they come together.

Testing—and specifically the PISA exams—drives education “reform”

PISA is the acronym for the “Programme for International Student Assessment.” It is a project of the OECD, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.

The PISA exam has become the most significant factor in influencing education policies around the globe, including in all three NAFTA countries. When new exam results are released in the form of league tables—lists giving a single number average result—the rankings get extensive publicity—and often wrong conclusions.

I was in the US when the results from the most-recent PISA math tests were announced. The media was full of claims that the schools are a disaster and the future of the American economy is threatened.

In Mexico, which came near the bottom of the rankings, those PISA results were used as a rationale for the education reforms that abandon long-held societal goals and undermine the rights of teachers.

Canada, in contrast, came out near the top in the PISA rankings. Despite that, we still heard the results as a reason for changing our system of education. The claim was that we might not maintain such a high position if we don't change. This despite no one having a crystal ball to predict the future economy, nor any research showing that a different approach would produce a better result for learning—or for economic competitiveness.

Regardless of results, PISA tests are used by politicians and bureaucrats to justify changes to education policy—to adopt the Global Education Reform Movement.

The tests are now given in more than 60 countries, and many more are expected to join the next round in 2015. In effect, the OECD, through PISA, has become the *de facto* governor of education directions globally.

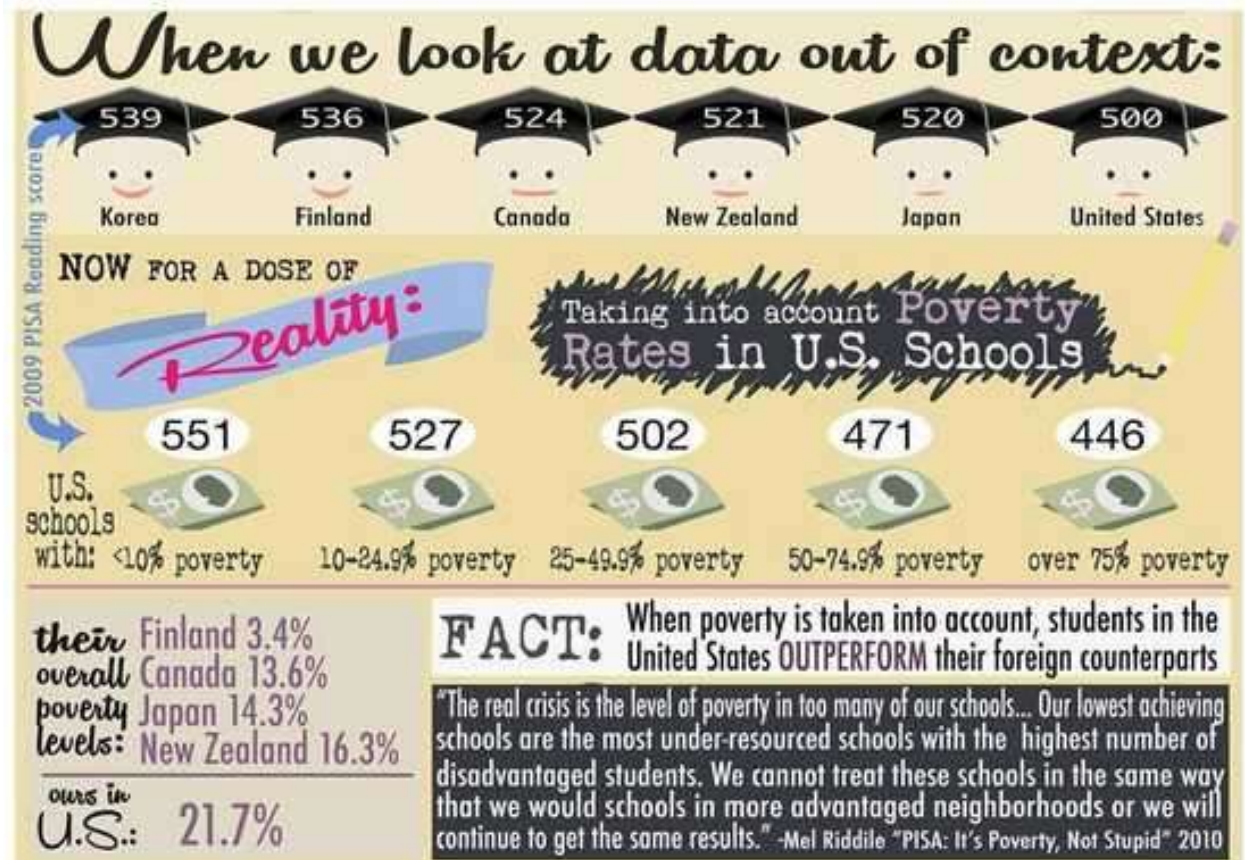
Naomi Klein describes the process that is used to create a climate for neo-liberal change as the “Shock Doctrine.” Low scores provide an opportunity to promote some action already planned, claiming the actions answer a problem.

The immediate response to low results is to blame the teachers. Most of the prescriptions for improving results attack existing structures and call for discipline of teachers through regulations. Mexico, for example, has used the results to demand tests of the teachers.

Seldom does any politician actually read the more-detailed reports on PISA. One of those PISA reports points out that the biggest factor in the difference in results is not teachers, but poverty. The social conditions in which students live have a major impact. Canada does better than the US—it also has lower levels of child poverty. The US and Canada do better than Mexico, which has a much higher rate of child poverty.

Clearly, poverty is not the only factor—teachers and schools do have an impact, but less than the out-of-school factors.

Canada also has more equality in funding education than does the US, meaning that the resources available to support students in school are more equal, regardless of student socio-economic status. A study of this aspect of the PISA results for Canada identified the smaller gap between top and bottom social status as a factor in producing higher average results.



reference article: http://nassblogs.org/principaldifference/2010/12/pisa_its_poverty_not_stupid_1.html
for more information, please visit: christinemccartney.net

The point about poverty is effectively made in an infographic (above) that shows the impact of poverty on PISA results both within the US and in international comparisons. I found this infographic on the Facebook feed from the “Bad Ass Teachers”—a Facebook group any teacher

should follow who feels the need to resist the impact of the Global Education Reform Movement.

If the OECD knows that poverty is the most significant factor in the range of scores on PISA, why are not governments, who claim to be concerned about education, moving to eliminate poverty and equalize education funding? Because it is easier—and cheaper—for governments to blame the teachers and bring in programs to “fix” those teachers.

The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund

Before PISA, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund were the most powerful institutions in influencing education in less-developed, or “emerging”, economies. Mostly they have focused on structural issues and teacher “accountability.”

They promote Charter Schools.

They recommend that countries without universal education get more of the world’s children into primary education—but without providing funds for reasonable class sizes, or professional levels of pay for teachers.

They call for decentralizing the responsibility for funding education, but centralizing the control of content and teachers.

Now one of their reports calls for the videotaping of teachers and coding their teaching against a rubric, to see whether they should get a bonus or be fired. This is the Gates Foundation techno-solution—sometimes characterized as “firing the way to Finland.”

The World Bank and International Monetary Fund join in blaming the teacher and demanding that they be fixed, rather than fixing the social conditions of the students.

These two international institutions still have a lot of power, particularly in less-developed countries, but the OECD has more, and growing, impact on global education policies.

A second major influence on education globally is Information and Communications Technologies

The spread of new ICTs has been rapid and ubiquitous.

It has created a new environment for our children—one whose impact is not well understood. In fact, it is hard to imagine how it can be understood, when its shape and dimension change so rapidly.

In this environment, we see many schemes and ideas for how technology could change education. Many of these are promoted as answering the enduring questions of education—for what purpose? How?—and Whose interests are served? As with the PISA results, policy-makers are presented with claims that particular technologies will prepare children to succeed in the global economy.

This growth in technology comes at a time when corporate capital has identified public education as the last, great, global money pot to tap into by privatization.

One Laptop Per Child has sold more than 2 million laptops in Latin America. Millions of tablets have been purchased, as well. The rationale is always to prepare the country for competition in the global economy.

All sorts of positive claims are made for the adoption of technology for education—many are at the stage that the “Gartner Hype Cycle” labels “peak of inflated expectations.” Three particular

directions fit into the inflated expectations stage: testing, adaptive learning, and data mining. The promise is that they will turn your school system in a 21st-century winner in the global race.

Here, as well, testing sets the global education agenda. One of the most high-profile applications of technology in the US is the billion-dollar iPad fiasco in Los Angeles. The intent was not to produce creative exploration, the implicit promise. Rather, it was to have students ready for tests, a centerpiece of the Common Core Curriculum.

Indeed, the next PISA exam to be given in 2015 is to be computer-based. Students who have experience in online testing may well have an advantage over those who have not. This will again provide an opportunity to blame the teacher for things over which they have little control.

“Adaptive learning” is the next “big thing.” In essence, it is an attempt to make education more “efficient” by automating aspects of teaching. It leads a student through some aspect of learning, adapting the questions it asks and material it supplies to student responses.

Ironically, this approach is referred to as “personalization.” A concept of personalization one might imagine would be to use technology as a platform for creative activity—activity that is not pre-determined, but an expression of student creativity. But adaptive learning is not that kind of personalization. Rather, it is pre-determined what direction the student is to take, and what can be varied is the time it takes to develop the understanding or skill to reach that pre-determined objective.

Then there is Big Data and data mining, another element of the “next big thing.” Audrey Watters, in an article called “Student Data is the New Oil”, describes the way that student data becomes a minable resource.

If all the data points created by a student, and by students collectively, can be captured, then algorithms can be used to mine all this data. Massive databases of student information are being developed, supposedly to be able to find the route that a student should take to accomplish an externally determined goal. Every keystroke captured, every website visited tracked, every conversation with friends monitored—and metadata collected about all this online activity.

Metadata—this is something we have learned about through the revelations of Edward Snowden demonstrating how much data we are producing—and how little we realize that we are all the subject of surveillance. And surveillance can be turned into profits. When school systems build huge databases, the potential and temptation are there to share data with marketers. For example, the InBloom school data project, which seems to have been killed after parents found out how their children’s data would be marketed. But don’t imagine that this will be the last attempt to do this.

Tests and data link to a third element of the Global Education Reform Movement: Corporate capital attempts to take over public education

Many of the themes developed previously come together when looking at the role of corporate capital in a possible takeover of education globally.

It may seem like a conspiracy theory to talk about this. But you need look no further than one company that is positioning itself to develop a near-monopoly of the digital in education: the Pearson corporation.

Pearson describes itself as the “global learning company.” It, like other major textbook publishers, faces the challenge of finding a new revenue stream, since the use of print textbooks is in rapid decline. Pearson’s policy now is that everything is digital only. It is preparing itself to

move out from making most of its fortune primarily in the most-developed countries to focusing on “emerging markets,” many of these being in Latin America.

Pearson has moved into all of the following areas: Curriculum and standards, including the Common Core Curriculum; online K-12 courses; digital learning resources; standardized tests; test preparation; identifying test cheaters; operating private schools in the developing world, as well as Charter schools; student information systems; alternative high-school certification; teacher licensing tests; teacher training and certification programs.

And Pearson has the contract with the OECD to run the next round of PISA exams. Not only that, but it will make recommendations for education reform based on the data gathered through the very tests it created. Diane Ravitch correctly says, “The corporation is acting as a quasi-government agency in several instances, but it is not a quasi-government agency: it is a business that sells products and services.”

Imagine how large a database Pearson is developing—and think about who owns that information, even if it is stripped of its links to individuals. Teachers in New York are in a conflict with Pearson right now. Pearson prohibits teachers from looking at the questions in the tests it has developed for the new Common Core Curriculum. It wants to reuse the tests in other “markets,” so it wants full control over all the test-response data gathered. This data is no longer owned by the student or the teacher, or even the school board that pays Pearson to give the tests. It all becomes part of a rapidly-growing set of data that Pearson uses to develop products to sell back to the people who create the data—and whose lives and identities are reflected in that data.

So back to the starting point of this article. How do the OECD’s PISA exams, information and communications technology, and corporate capital all come together in ways that are a threat to public control of education?

The audit and accountability culture of the Global Education Reform Movement—GERM—makes it ever more possible to take education out of the hands of those who create it and should own it—teachers, students, and the public. Instead, we are seeing it turned into an internationally-tradable commodity.

As Audrey Watters asks: “If data in education is the ‘new oil,’ who is to profit from the drilling?”

And this brings us finally to NAFTA and its precursor, the Canada-US Trade Agreement—these were the first trade agreements to incorporate trade in services. They and many others negotiated or under negotiation are designed to meet corporate interests rather than the public interest.

Collectively, we need to understand the corporate nature of this globalization. And we need to work together to develop strategies that interrupt and challenge the culture of GERM.

References:

- Meyer, H.-D., and Benavot, A., eds. (2013). *PISA, Power and Policy: The emergence of global educational governance*. Oxford, UK: Symposium Books.
- Ravitch, D. (2013). *Reign of error: The hoax of the privatization movement and the danger to America’s public schools*. Toronto: Random House of Canada.
- Watters, A. (2013). “Student Data is the New Oil: MOOCs, Metaphor, and Money.” Downloaded May 5, 2014, from <http://hackeducation.com/2013/10/17/student-data-is-the-new-oil/> .