

THE TRANSFORMATIVE IMPACT OF INTERNATIONAL LARGE-SCALE ASSESSMENTS (ILSAs) ON NATIONAL EDUCATION SYSTEMS

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Abstract:

International Large-Scale Assessments (ILSAs) like PISA, TIMSS, and PIRLS have shaken up education policy around the world. These global tests don't just collect data—they set the tone for what's important in schools. Suddenly, countries aren't just looking inward; they're comparing themselves to everyone else. This article digs into how ILSAs drive policy changes, spark curriculum reforms, and shape new ways to hold schools accountable. There are clear upsides—like smarter, data-driven decision making and a bigger focus on what students can actually do, not just what they memorize. But there are also serious worries: teachers end up teaching to the test, some subjects get squeezed out, and blindly copying “best practices” from top-ranking countries rarely works as planned.

Keywords:

Ilsas (International Large-Scale Assessments), Pisa Effect, Educational Policy Borrowing, Curriculum Alignment, Accountability, Global Governance Of Education, Teaching To The Test, Competency-Based Education

1. Introduction: The Rise of Global Performance Indicators

In today's world, countries are obsessed with staying competitive, and that means investing in people. So it's no surprise that education leaders have latched onto International Large-Scale Assessments. Organizations like the OECD (with PISA) and the IEA (with TIMSS and PIRLS) have turned these tests into global benchmarks. Unlike old-school measures—money spent, hours taught, or textbook quality—ILSAs look at what students can actually do, especially 15-year-olds in PISA's case, and how they apply what they know in real situations.

When results come out, they instantly make headlines. You see your country's name in a global ranking, and suddenly everyone's talking—politicians, the media, parents. If a country scores low, there's a flood of debate and finger-pointing, sometimes called the "PISA Shock." People want answers, and fast.

2. How ILSAs Shape Policy

ILSAs change education in a few key ways:

2.1. Sparking Political Action and Funding

A poor ILSA ranking isn't just embarrassing—it's a wake-up call. It gives leaders hard evidence that things need to change. This outside pressure helps break through political gridlock. Suddenly, it's a lot easier to push for new funding or major reforms, even if they're unpopular. Take Germany: after its disappointing PISA results in 2000, the country launched a wave of reforms.

2.2. Borrowing Policies and Chasing "Best Practices"

PISA and other ILSAs don't just rank countries. They collect tons of data about how schools operate, from teaching styles to classroom environments. This lets countries zero in on top performers—think Finland, Singapore, Estonia—and try to copy what works. But here's the catch: simply copying another country's policies rarely works out as planned. Local culture and politics matter, and what's brilliant in one place can flop somewhere else.

2.3. Aligning Curriculum and Teaching

ILSAs don't test the nitty-gritty details of national curricula. Instead, they focus on broader competencies—like reading, math, and science skills that cross

subject boundaries. That pressure pushes countries to move away from curriculum stuffed with facts, and instead focus on what students can do with their knowledge.

PISA, for example, promotes skills like problem-solving and critical thinking. As a result, many countries shift their curricula to highlight these abilities and encourage teachers to go beyond rote memorization. TIMSS and PIRLS, while more tethered to traditional subjects, still nudge countries toward tougher standards in math, science, and reading.

3. The Downsides and Criticisms

For all their benefits, ILSAs come with some serious baggage:

3.1. Narrowing the Curriculum and Teaching to the Test

When so much rides on scores in reading, math, and science, schools start to sideline everything else. Arts, humanities, and physical education often get pushed aside. Teachers feel the heat and focus mainly on what's measured, sometimes at the cost of broader, well-rounded learning.

3.2. Ethical and Methodological Worries

There's a lot of debate over whether it's fair—or even possible—to compare countries this way. For one, cultural bias is tough to eliminate. Even with their best efforts, these tests can end up favoring the teaching styles and educational values of wealthier, mostly Western countries in the OECD. So while ILSAs open up important conversations, they're far from perfect.

When students sit for big national exams, they usually feel a different kind of pressure compared to when they take international large-scale assessments (ILSAs). Let's be honest—if the ILSA score doesn't affect their future, a lot of students just don't take it as seriously. That alone can bend the results, especially in countries where these tests have zero personal consequences.

3.3. Accountability Overload

The numbers ILSAs produce often feed into what people call an “audit culture.” Suddenly, rankings and scores start to define what “quality” means in education. Schools get judged by the numbers, and everyone starts to forget that

teaching is about more than just data. Professional judgment? Ethical choices? Those get sidelined. In some places, governments lean hard on these rankings to hold schools accountable. If a school or region scores low, they pay the price—sometimes literally.

4. Conclusion: Navigating Global Standards and Local Needs

International Large-Scale Assessments have become a powerhouse in global education. They hand over a treasure trove of data that policy-makers use to track quality and push for reforms. These tests have shifted the conversation, moving everyone's attention from just funding or resources to actual student results.

But here's the thing: for these assessments to be truly useful, a country needs to know how to use the data wisely. The real challenge is figuring out how to use ILSAs to spot weaknesses and find smart ideas from around the world, without falling into the trap of teaching just for the test or blindly copying policies that don't fit local needs. Education systems work best when they balance global insights with local realities—culture, economy, and how people actually teach and learn. When you get that balance right, global benchmarking becomes a tool for real improvement and fairness, not just another way to keep score in some international education race.

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