

Book Review / Recensión de libros

Carabaña, J. (2015): *La inutilidad de PISA para las escuelas* [The uselessness of PISA for schools]. Madrid: Catarata

Anna Jordina Llorens Ferrer (anorllo@uv.es)
University of Valencia (Spain)

It is not the first time that Julio Carabaña, professor of sociology of education at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid, explores matters concerning PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment)¹. His last book, *La inutilidad de PISA para las escuelas* (2015) proves why it is important that international reports assume realistic and feasible aims (this is qualified by the author as the “essential fail”, p.20). This author develops a huge investigation into PISA reports up to 2012, reflecting on its main features: what PISA is, what it measures and what it shows. These are respectively the parts of the book, including an epilogue and a brief but useful glossary with recurrent terms within the scope of international educative reports. Here one can find such expressions translated from English into Spanish.

As far as the first part is concerned, “what is PISA?” (pp. 13-43), the author traces the historical path through which he has considered the “PISA antecedents”. The author stresses the birth of an interest for

system evaluations in the US, where he specifically mentions evaluative documents previous to the PISA report. Among many, these documents include Coleman Report (1968), within the frame of EEOS, (Equality of Educational Opportunity Survey) and EEOR (Equality of Educational Opportunity Report, 1964 and subsequent ones); ETS (Educational Testing Service) IEA (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, from 1958) which paved the way for IAEP (International Assessment of Educational Progress), TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) and PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study). On several occasions, the author establishes comparisons among some of these reports and PISA, proving an impressive similarity (see, for instance, the comparison between EEOS and PISA in p.42. In the following pages, one can find similarities with other reports). Besides these considerations, he stresses various theoretical references that the unspecialised reader needs to consider to carry out an appropriate text reading. Among these, for instance, the author stresses why it is necessary to understand the difference

¹ See Carabaña, J. (2008): *PISA 2006: sin novedad*. Claves de razón práctica, n. 179, pp. 22-27. ISSN 1130-3689.

between synchronic and diachronic evaluations, attitude and efficiency tests, etc. Also, in this part there are statistical explanations supporting a number of analyses so that even the non-insider reader can easily follow the argument.

In this part, Carabaña takes the reader by hand, explaining in a really simple manner what PISA is, its composition, its strengths (reasons why to bet on PISA and its success) and its most recent intentions. However, though there is an indirect mention, I do not know whether the reader will understand by him/herself that there are two different PISA reports, something that Carabaña does not mention explicitly. While ‘standard’ PISA is applied every three years, there is another one which was born in 2010, ‘PISA for Educational Centres’. There was a pilot sample already in Spain in that year. The *Boletín de Educación* of EducaINEE (INEE, 2016), number 46, January issue, develops a short but nice explanation on its features. Although it maintains the same evaluation method of standard PISA, this report is optional. It is only necessary that schools enrol in it in order to participate and have at least 44 adolescents of age 15 enrolled. Therefore, it seems that Carabaña refers to standard PISA at all times.

Between the introduction and the first block there is a direct reference as to why PISA can be useful or useless for educational systems and schools. While on the one hand the author defends that standard PISA presents enormous difficulties in demonstrating the utility of its tests (p.20), he as well argues that it cannot even demonstrate that the competences that are evaluated can be achieved through pedagogic and political changes that she herself proposed; on the other hand, he refers indirectly to PISA for Educative Centres, where he proposes that it could be more trustworthy for two reasons: because there is a very rigorous statistical method to separate the variation that is produced between the schools and because the sample between schools are a lot bigger, and therefore the statistical inferences were much more secure (p. 11).

In the second part, “what does PISA measure?” (pp.49-132), he develops a large explanation of the word ‘literacy’ (translated as *literacia* into Spanish), where he explains to the castellanoparlante readers all of the interferences with the language of Cervantes. It is Carabaña himself, doing reflections about the neologism “literacy,” who proposes choosing this term as the most appropriate translation. At the end, independently of what would be the translation to Castellano, we demonstrated what it is that PISA intends to define with this term: *literacy* is understood as those capabilities, attitudes and skills that allow one to acquire other more specific insights. (pp. 52-55)². PISA also defines it as the aptitude that refers to ‘meta-knowledge’ or ‘meta-skills’ (p. 55) so that once students have acquired it they can learn in an autonomous manner throughout their entire life, being conscious of their own methods of learning, mental processes and educative strategies that are considered the most useful (p.60). Here we start—to see how PISA pretensions are inevitably utopian. To what extent is a 15 year-old teenager aware of her own learning strategies? Of course this would be desirable and one hopes it would be like this but, until what point does she realizes that by means of the use of metaknowledge, she can improve her own learning? If she was aware, why would she go to school then? Either way, this is a different debate. In the end, the purpose of analysing PISA reports is to indicate that schools should pay less attention to individual insights and more to procedures and general competences (p. 65). But here is where Carabaña, in this same section, launches a very scary question: where does PISA’s knowledge about what is important for life (and what society wants) about a rivalry o incompatibility with the curricular information and about what the schools work on currently? (p.63). In the face of this possible attempt, PISA defends that what matters is not to having information, but to knowing how to use it in an adequate

²Carabaña coins the term ‘Jenks conjecture’ to refer the fact that reports overwhelm focus on attitudes and no learning processes. He dedicates the whole epilogue to this argument.

manner in particular situations (pp.63-64). But, what is it adequate? Could what is adequate for one is or could be adequate for another? In the PISA reports, the novelty that stands out against former reports is precisely this: measuring and analysing the relevance of literacy in schools (p.54). Also, in this section an incision is made into the understanding of the terms ‘skills’, ‘knowledge’ and ‘competences’. Thus, throughout this block the author develops a large argument about the tests of reading literacy, mathematics and problem resolution., as well as problem solving.³ In all this documentation, Carabaña provides significant information, properly framing the contextualization of the tests and their relation with precedents previously mentioned. The initial idea we could extract from the reports addressed here is that, apparently, PISA attempts to demonstrate that the learning of contents (which is what most of schools carry out) competes with learning literacies (p. 114). However, the author strives to make us understand that we can neither affirm nor defend that the insistence on the learning of one aspect can damage another.

In the third part, ‘what does PISA teach?’ (pp. 133-229), there is a reflection on the irrationality of its objectives set out by said report. Although the features that PISA evaluates are important (resources, including teachers, pedagogic practices, school organization and school time), it does not refer to any proposal to improve didactic practice of schools (which is what it really tries to do). PISA simply dedicates itself to describing all the evaluated factors, attempting to induce from the start educative change (p. 195) but without any methodological proposal that could be feasible and as such improve the learning. As Carabaña stresses, ‘among the characteristics examined by PISA one misses those related to didactics’ (p. 195). In this section, the author admits that this report ‘has indeed achieved its purpose of measuring competencies that do

not depend on the students’ knowledge in particular areas’ (pp. 121-122), alluding to the term ‘literacy’. However, Carabaña himself ends the former section with an important consideration: ‘if PISA continues measuring general abilities such as the aforementioned literacies, it will not manage to find many differences among schools’ (p.132), since literacy is such a general learning that it cannot demonstrate to what extent it is learned inside or outside the school and to what extent the particular didactic of the school benefits it or not. Repeating the findings of EEOR, PISA does not find significant differences between schools, nor specific features of these that can explain why such differences are implemented (the author does mention a few in pages 137-147, but he insists that these references are insufficient). For Carabaña, the most valuable result from international studies such as PISA is that they allow one to evaluate the bias and the validity of much of the previous educative research (p. 137). This report attempts to assert that resources, practices and politics are, sometimes, the motives whereby one associates the difference in the results of one scholar system to another (p. 163). However, this report cannot assert which practices are more adequate than other ones.

Does PISA propose didactic methodologies? It does. This is because it proposes ideas on discipline, making a direct reference to teacher-hiring, proposing that accountability systems should be established, increasing school autonomy, etc. But, does PISA suggest specific didactic methodologies that can improve the teaching-learning process in schools? No. In its analysis, PISA does not consider the specific didactics of each centre, nor does it propose methodologies that can improve them.

Finally, Carabaña proposes that, until these didactic proposals of improvement appear, schools can focus on what they can already improve: by encouraging appropriate attitudes and behaviours of their students, increasing their motivation, working the frustration and the study strategies or the control of the individual learning process (p. 211).

³ There is no mention on scientific literacy. However, the following chapters devotes some lines to financial literacy, which was proposed by PISA in the 2012 report.

It is book absolutely recommended for all audiences, with suitable language and with a well-established analytic method. Moreover, the author has taken great pains in making the interpretation of a number of statistical and graphic resources, which for the non-specialized reader could seem difficult to understand, accessible. It is a work that makes one reflect in a cohesive way on the reflections that justify PISA’s implementation and the relevance of its results – as, in repeated occasions, especially when the scope of political leaders and the media gives undue prominence to these type of educational policies⁴. However, thanks to the argumentative work of Carabaña we can easily understand that the relevance of PISA results is relative, since no evaluation is useful if it does not present some adequate propositions of improvement. Moreover, the author also demonstrates, through his thorough historical analysis of evaluation reports, which PISA does not present practically any novelty with respect to the scholarship on evaluation that has been developed in the last 50 years (which really challenges the originality PISA attributes to itself).

Despite the fact that the whole book is very interesting, one of the biggest problems of today that is does not address with sufficient interest the treatment and usage of PISA results today. For instance, this is the case of rankings that are generated drawn from the reports: ‘it seems that most part of the result do not refer to schools, but countries’ (p.155), and however, results are not being understood in the correct way. For example, how many politicians would know that the mean of PISA reports is 500 points, and that standard deviation is 100? If they know it, it seems that their public argumentations just do not consider it. Let us address one simple issue: if country X has 524 points in PISA ranking, and country Y has 525, do both countries

⁴ See the introduction of the *Ley Orgánica 8/2013*, from 9 December, for the improvement of educational quality (LOMCE), whose implementation is justified among other arguments through the negative results of Spain provided by PISA. *Boletín Oficial del Estado*, 10 de diciembre de 2013 (pp. 4-6).

entail huge differences in their characteristics? No, on the contrary, they present many similarities. However, is not how the media would present it?

This is why Carabaña attempts to show, on the basis on the results of this sort of global reports (such as standard PISA), that there are not educative politics emerging from them and that they are useful without taking into account the specific characteristic of the centre (such as the case of its didactic). Firstly, because the contextual characteristics of the countries are so different that in all of them it is obvious that the same educational policies cannot function. Secondly, because in the analysis of literature that PISA does one cannot argue to what extent the evaluated attitudes are required within the school or outside of it. And thirdly, because the number of evaluated items between countries is too scarce so as to undertake a reliable and valid evaluation, here is where the great contribution by Carabaña emerges, compiling and organizing these types of arguments. As far as the first point of this reflection is concerned, we observe that the proposed analysis by our author are closely linked to proposals by Viñao y Frago (2002) and Puelles (2006), who rightly highlighted that no proposal of educational reform or policy will be efficient without considering the context and particular features of each school. Namely, these two authors make special reference to the importance of taking into account the scholar cultures (Viñao & Frago, 2002: 71-80) and school grammar (Puelles, 2006: 82) before implementing whatever type of reform.

Although his reflection is very concrete, Carabaña does admit the utility of PISA for Educative Centres (although we know that he does not refer to this other report as such). Even so, we should not forget that this author stresses that for any type of report to be useful one cannot intend to evaluate a factor as general and abstract as literacy.

Many are the articles that have been interested in addressing the theme of PISA. However, none has made evident their shortcomings as much as Carabaña.

Furthermore, there exists an article that I would like to recommend, “*Todos queremos ser Finlandia*”: los efectos secundarios de PISA (Barquín Ruiz, Gallardo Gil, Fernández Navas, Yus Ramos, Sepúlveda Ruiz & Serván Núñez, 2011), for its close linkage to the book we have just reviewed.

In conclusion, throughout the entirety of the book, the author presents strengths and weaknesses of the PISA report. But, as he rightly poses, we are those who have to judge whether it tells the truth of our educational system (p. 213).

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