AERA PRESIDENTIAL SYMPOSIUM

Introductory Comments

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Welcome!

Today's symposium focuses on how countries have reacted to and changed their policies in response to international test-score comparisons.

I'm Iris Rotberg, a member of the Education Policy faculty at The George Washington University.

Michael Feuer and I are co-chairing the symposium. Michael is Dean of the Graduate School of Education and Human Development at The George Washington University.

Our panelists are:

Yong Zhao, Presidential Chair and Associate Dean for Global Education, and Professor of Education Methodology, Policy, and Leadership at the University of Oregon College of Education.

Alison Wolf, Sir Roy Griffiths Professor of Public Sector Management at King's College, University of London.

Michal Beller, Director General, National Authority for Educational Measurement and Evaluation, Israeli Ministry of Education.

I will begin by setting the context for the symposium. Our panelists will then discuss the issues from the perspective of countries in Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. Michael Feuer, as discussant, will have the last word!

Our speakers today will analyze the conclusions policymakers have drawn from the international test-score rankings and describe the public policies that have been implemented in response to these conclusions. They will also consider the extent to which the policies are supported by research evidence.

Perhaps no research finding in the field of education has received more public attention than international test-score rankings. Countries throughout the world have typically viewed the rankings as a measure of the quality of their education systems. In Germany, where PISA results have been viewed as an "educational catastrophe," a government official upgraded his assessment of the German education system from "horrendous" to "average" based on recent gains on PISA. Very minor declines in test scores in Sweden have been viewed as a "crisis;" in Japan, they were interpreted as "the deterioration of student achievement." Despite high test scores, educators in Hong Kong are concerned that it is being surpassed by Shanghai. And, after results of each international comparison are released, Americans are convinced, as they have been since international testing began almost 50 years ago—and, even before that, with the launch of Sputnik—that our schools are failing and, indeed, that as a result of our test-score ranking the country will be unable to compete in the global economy. The assumed link between test scores and the global economy, along with claims of shortages of scientists and engineers, has been an integral part of U. S. political rhetoric for years.

In addition to concerns about the quality of education generally, countries have focused on the achievement gap between students based on their socioeconomic and immigrant status. In the United States, the gap has been visible for many decades because of the country's long history of diversity and the disproportionate numbers of minorities who live in poverty. For many countries in Europe, however, increased immigration has led to a level of diversity that the countries had not previously experienced. PISA has been a major factor in increasing awareness of the achievement gap.

The magnitude of the gap has been particularly painful for countries like Sweden, which have prided themselves on their egalitarian tradition. These countries now face problems similar to those experienced in the United States: a significant achievement gap based on socioeconomic status, although somewhat less pronounced because of a smaller gap in income and wealth than in the United States and a stronger support system. The level of immigration varies considerably among European countries. Some countries, like Sweden, have significant immigration, while in others, like Finland, immigration is very limited; however, all are concerned about the achievement gap.

Perhaps PISA has had its greatest impact on public awareness of the achievement gap in Germany, which tracks children into three separate types of schools beginning in grade 5. Because SES is highly correlated with academic achievement, middle- and upper-class students are disproportionately represented in the academic track, with the lowest track enrolling the highest proportion of migrant workers' children. By magnifying the effects of SES, the tracking system is consistent with the PISA finding that the performance of German students correlates more strongly with SES than the performance of students in most other participating countries. Germany's early tracking

system is currently being debated, with attempts in some states to move to a two-track system or track students two years later. Not surprisingly, these changes are highly controversial.

Countries have responded to their concerns about test-score rankings and the achievement gap by increasing the emphasis on testing and accountability and by implementing changes both in curriculum and in instruction. Although test-based accountability has played a central role in the United States and England for many years, until recently it had not been widely used in other countries. More countries have now adopted accountability requirements in an attempt to raise test scores and close the achievement gap. At the same time, the United States and England have made their accountability requirements more demanding, despite disappointing results and the fact that in many instances the requirements have created perverse incentives that weaken rather than strengthen student achievement.

There are still many countries that do not use test-based accountability and some countries--for example, France and Japan--actively discourage it. Yet, in response to PISA results, even France and Japan have increased the use of national assessments of student progress. France recently implemented an assessment of the achievement of primary school students in French and mathematics, and Japan conducted its first national assessment of student achievement since 1964.

A major impact of standardized testing, both international and national, has been to increase emphasis on basic skills instruction. Japan responded to the minor decline in test scores with an official apology by a Minister of Education to the children of Japan for reforms that he described as encouraging a "relaxed style of education." He promised to return to more emphasis on "fundamental knowledge and skills." The relaxed

style of education he referred to was a curriculum reform in 2002 designed to increase students' access to a broad-based education and reduce the emphasis on rote learning. The curriculum was designed to lead to what was described as a "zest for life" and the ability to "survive independently and creatively in the twenty-first century." However, the PISA results were interpreted as an indicator that the curriculum reform had weakened Japan's education system.

In the United States, which has traditionally prided itself on providing a broad-based education, many schools have now also narrowed the curriculum in response to accountability requirements, which give a strong incentive to focus on basic skills. We know from the experience of countries throughout the world that what is tested is what is taught—whether the tests are for the purpose of evaluating teachers or sorting students.

Countries have also responded to test-score rankings by increasing standardization of curriculum, encouraging more students to take advanced science and mathematics courses, revising teacher training and professional development programs, and encouraging a more equitable distribution of teachers across high- and low-poverty schools. Some countries have focused on special programs for low-income and immigrant students in an attempt to close the achievement gap.

The panelists will describe the conclusions drawn from the international comparisons that have influenced policy decisions in areas such as the education of low-income, minority, and immigrant students; testing and accountability; and curriculum and instruction. They will describe how the international comparisons influenced the countries' policies—that is, why the policies were selected and how they were designed to solve particular problems.

The symposium will conclude with Michael Feuer's discussion of whether—and how—research findings were used in policy deliberations and the extent to which research evidence does—and does not—support the conclusions drawn from the international comparisons and the policies that were subsequently implemented. He will also comment on the implications for future research and policy directions.

I would like to conclude my comments by thanking Copernicus for the title of this session: "To know that we know what we know, and to know that we do not know what we do not know, that is true knowledge." His advice 500 years ago is as pertinent to current policy deliberations in response to international test-score comparisons as it was to the scientific deliberations of his day.

Note: Some of the discussion and most of the quotations in the proposal are based on material in the concluding chapters of *Balancing Change and Tradition in Global Education Reform, Second Edition*, Iris C. Rotberg, editor (Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2004, 2010). The quotation by the German government official on page 2 is from *The New York Times* (December 8, 2010) and the quotation by the Japanese Minister of Education on pages 4 - 5 is from the translation of an article from the *Yomiuri Journal* (April 22, 2005).