

**PISA discourse in Brazil: inclusion and exclusion shaping the subjects for the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

Márcia Aparecida Amador Mascia<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>São Francisco University – São Paulo State- Brazil

marciaaam@uol.com.br

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**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to analyze the external assessment PISA considered as discursive practice in Education. The data of the analysis are documents of PISA on OECD and INEP websites. The theoretical perspective is the post-critical studies. The scientific significance of this investigation is to understand how through comparisons between Brazil and worldwide the discourses related to PISA fabricate a mentality that sustain the success/failure in education. We conclude that the numbers of PISA create reality in which the subjects are produced, inventing the self and the others and forging the notion of equality, as we consider the numbers not transparent. The findings also point that the magnitude of numbers in which PISA subscribes operate in a way of erasing the inequalities and producing an apparent idea of inclusion in Brazil and worldwide.

**Keywords:** PISA-Brazil, Subjectivity, Education, Discourse Analysis, Inclusion/Exclusion.

### **Introduction:**

As one of the effects of globalization, especially in the western countries, external evaluations have gained space, consisting of instruments applied by external agents to the school context, in order to assess the knowledge and skills, considered necessary for the evolution from one cycle to another in an ever-larger universe. Such assessments, nationally or internationally, are driven by the objective of creating quality references from comparative samples, the results of which involve a survey of data and which may imply governmental strategies, hence we use the term governmentality by Michel Foucault (1991), that is, policy definitions that affect the education of a state or country.

In 1999, PISA (the Programme for International Student Assessment) was launched by the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) with the aim to assess aspects of preparedness for adult life. “The purpose of PISA is to provide evidence on students’ capacities to continue learning throughout their lives, focused on 15-year-old students when they have finished their compulsory schooling” (OECD, 2000: 3).

Since then, the results have been compared among countries, reducing PISA to “a horse-race with winners and losers” (De Lange, 2006: 17). Internationally, there have been criticism among academics about the quality and effectiveness of PISA assessment in countries education systems (Mascia, 2020; Dancis, 2014; Ercikan *et al*, 2015; Leung, 2014; Sireci, 2015; Tienken, 2014).

In my country, Brazil, the results always lead to a feeling of failure and exclusion, depreciating the school agents, like students, teachers, principals and also approaches and curricula proposals.

In order to investigate about it, I have been analyzing the impacts of PISA results in Administered by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) PISA provides data of countries comparison, at national, international, and global level, that show which countries achieved success or failure in the education system. The data comparisons have been used in many countries as base for education policy, and it appears especially in government reports, policy statements and issue papers. (Baird *et al*, 2016; Lindblad, Pettersson, & Popkewitz, 2015; Ozga, 2012).

Hopfenbeck *et al* (2018: 346) undertook a comprehensive bibliographical synthesis of PISA-related research in academic journals that provides information on how it evolved over the years as well as across disciplines and countries. But we recognize the limitations of their study, as they only reviewed articles written in English. As there are many articles in Brazilian Portuguese about PISA

related to the results in Brazil, but few written in English (Mascia, 2020), this article adds to the findings of these studies offering a study about PISA in Brazil for the world audience.

Taking into account the above context, the following research question is intended to be answered: what are the new regimes of truth that emerge from the discourse of PISA in relation to the subjectivities in Education in Brazil? Post-critical thinking and discourse studies constitute the theoretical-methodological perspective.

The corpus consists of the discourses of the documents of PISA disposed on the website of the OECD and the website INEP-Brazil.

We organized this paper into 3 sections: in the next section, we present the theoretical-methodological framework, then we describe the macro-analysis, followed by the discursive micro-analysis.

### **Theoretical-Methodological Background**

This section is dedicated to explore the theoretical framework, that is, the concepts of: discourse, object, subject, power and governmentality.

We understand discourse as defined by Foucault, “a body of anonymous, historical rules, always determined in the time and space that have defined a given period, and for a given social, economic, or linguistic area, the conditions of operation of the enunciative function”. (Foucault, 1972: 117).

For post critical studies, the objects of knowledge are defined under certain social and historical conditions and rules, that define the discursive formations. For the author (1972), the meanings are constructed inside the discursive formations. It is also inside the discursive formations that we make our discursive choices in detriment of others.

Language is the main element in the construction of social life, actually our relation with the world is crossed by language, in other words, by the discursive rules that prescribe how to behave in society: we are not allowed to say whatever we want, but we have to follow rules that establish what, when and in which way we should say, act and see the world and ourselves.

Popkewitz (1997: 138) calls this way of study as linguistic turn, “which focuses on the discursive patterns through which schooling is constituted. The concerns with how the systems of ideas construct, shape and coordinate social actions through the relations and ordering principles they establish”.

We are taking inclusion in education as a discursive practice, so if we talk about inclusion, we talk about discourses, that is, a concept that is constructed according to certain power-knowledge relations that express particular modes of reasoning about the world – the subject (the self) and the objects (things in the world).

It is important to state the conception of power for Foucault and in this paper. The author's studies challenge the Marxist conception of power which for him is not only concentrated in the dominant classes, otherwise it permeates the whole society. He dedicated his studies to the microphysics of power, that constitutes a diffuse bundle in the discourses of daily life.

For Foucault, discursive practices are produced by power-knowledge relations. So, If we think about inclusion as a discursive practice, power it is implied. The analysis of inclusion through Foucault's lenses should challenge the social science and interrogate the conditions of the emergence of what is called inclusion/exclusion.

When we talk about post critical perspective, we talk about the decentering of the subjects, considered as a historical construction and also the notion of included subjects and excluded ones as construction. This way, not taking the subject as a previous entity permits us to problematize the

concept of inclusion/exclusion upon which the notion of PISA is constructed.

Power for Foucault, as it was revisited in this paper, is “one of the modes by which in our culture human beings are made subjects” (Foucault, 1983: 208). In his studies of power, the author developed the notion of governmentality. For the author, governmentality is:

The ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, the calculations and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power, which has as its target population, as its principal form of knowledge political economy, and as its essential technical means apparatuses of security. (Foucault, 1991: 102-103).

The art of governing suffered a change with the advent of Modernity and has risen in the sixteenth century from the government of a territory to an art of governing the population (Foucault, 1991). The governmentality is applied to a variety of government performances that have as the target the population and the knowledge of economy as action strategies.

Later, the target of the governing became more of the subject at the level of the consciousness and conduct of each individual who represent the population. The student and teacher are sort of citizens to whom the state's govern is addressed in order to conduct and guide by practices which are externalized by statements. This way, governmentality helps to interrogate how subjects have been shaped into thinkable and manageable ways, what means to discuss the discursive practices that operate in the construction of reality as we know. Governmentality helps us to destabilize social practices that are taken for granted. For Dean (1999, p. 21), governmentality calls us to examine our “taken-for-granted ways of doing things” because they are not necessarily self-evident.

In this line of thought, the discourse analysis, with which the current paper works on, is strongly related to the constitution of educational subjects as a result of governing the individual. The subjects revealed in the discourses can be described as a made-up people by the idea of Ian Hacking's concept (1986). Hacking analyzes how a kind of person can be produced as a result of discursive practice. By pointing at the link between the materiality and discourse, he proposes that naming someone as, for example, adolescent, autism, abnormal, or competent, the person is classified in the name as a kind of person, which did not exist before the naming practice started. Linking the idea of discourse, governmentality, and making of a kind of person, this study aims to discuss the discursive practice of OECD PISA in making and governing of the educational subjects.

The PISA discourse is being conceived as a form of governmentality having the population as the target and the tests are the apparatuses of security.

After showing the paradigm we are inserted, the following section presents the macro-analysis.

## **Macro-analysis**

The context, also understood as macro-discourse, or even the conditions of production of our corpus, PISA discourse, relates to the geographical, social and historical period in which external assessments, like PISA, have emerged, both in the world and Brazil.

Brazil is the world's fifth largest country and by geographical area and by population the largest in South America, with a population of over 218 million people, counting with 26 states. It is the largest lusophone (Portuguese-speaking) country in the world. Brazil is divided in 5 regions: south, southeast, north, northeast and central west. These regions are characterized by differences in

geography, culture, dialect, but especially in relation to the distribution of the wealth. Visibly, the richer regions are the south and southeast and the poorer are the north and northeast, representing two poles. We can also see these two poles inside the richer regions too, especially in the capitals, like São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Belo Horizontes and so on, living side by side extremely poor people and extremely wealthy ones, poverty and richness, contradictions seen in the results of PISA, for example.

In relation to the political situation, Brazil, which was ruled by a military dictatorship, at the end of the 20th century, overthrew the dictatorship, reinstalling the democracy. With the advent of democracy, we saw the amnesty of the crimes of the dictatorship which were forgiven. In relation to social improvement, the process of the distribution of income promoted by the democratic presidents at the end of the 20th century did not change the social inequalities, and the crisis in Education continued during the civilian governors. Nevertheless, within the risen of the Worker's party to the power, especially with Luíz Inácio Lula da Silva as president, in 2002, both the basic (fundamental and high school) and the university had an improvement, even though very timid.

During the first years that Brazil is taking part in PISA, we were under the Worker's Party management. In 2016, we suffered the impeachment of Dilma, of the Worker's Party, with the rising of the vice, Michel Temer, with a central ideology and in his presidency the last edition of PISA-2018 took place.

In Brazil, despite of improvement on average PISA scores, the results are below the OECD average. Among the problems, we can quote: the huge social difference among its population, which creates advantaged and disadvantaged students with huge difference in scores; the qualification of teachers and differences in the curriculum around the country. For the first, actions of the socialist government, Lula and Dilma, have allocated resources in disadvantaged schools and also in the families, by School Scholarship (Bolsa Escola) and Family Scholarship (Bolsa Família), a program from the Federal Government that has added stipends for children of all age, but especially those aged between 15 and 17, which encouraged higher enrolment and attendance in high schools, where attendance is lowest. For the second, government conducted a program of attracting and retaining qualified teachers, either by increasing the teacher salary or creating mandatory laws of university teacher qualification. And for the third, the federal government has started setting curriculum standards and also has started the mandatory basic school for 12 years of schooling.

Unfortunately, with the risen of Michel Temer, with a right-wing ideology, followed by Bolsonaro, with a neo-fascist ideology, education in Brazil has lost all the programs and we lived six years of civilizational regression and educational poverty. This year, 2023, the left party conquered power again and we are undertaking a huge reform in education.

Having discussed the macro-discourse, the following section is dedicated to the micro-analysis.

### **Micro-analysis**

After demonstrated on the section above the geographical-social-historical moment in which the representations of PISA discourse are constructed, this section is dedicated to the micro-analysis, that is, based on the conditions of production, it has the aim of identifying the main of meanings of the discourse.

We investigated on the website of OECD (<http://www.oecd.org/pisa/>) and INEP-Brazil (<http://portal.inep.gov.br/pisa/sobre-opisa>). Let's start with an excerpt of the OECD website in which it is told the kind of tests that are applied to the students.

In the link, What the assessment involves, we find the following:

*The tests are a mixture of open-ended and multiple-choice questions that are organized in groups based on a passage setting out a real-life situation. A total of about 390 minutes of test items are covered. Students take different combinations of different tests.*

Education has always been related to regimes of truth and fabrication of subjects and this is exactly what happens with the contemporary Education whose rules are being dictated by external tests, like PISA. Our analysis focuses on the phrase, tests “based on a passage setting out a real-life situation”. What are the rationality principles that are responsible to organize what is important to be known and what is not? How should one act and think of solutions for real life situations? What are important real life situations in contemporary issues of education? And real-life situation from and for whom?

The discourse obliterates the subjects for whom this is a real-life situation, installing the meaning that it can be for every country, every student, what makes us imply that the subjects are taken as universal. If we consider this enunciation, “real-life situation”, in a country like Brazil, we have different real-life situations. Otherwise, if we take into account the different nations of the world, compared one with each other, the different meanings of real-life situation would increase exaggeratedly. So, how students are supposed to deal with their real-life situation will change from country to country, region to region.

We can conclude that by producing realities, these tests do not measure students’ knowledge, they actually dictate how the subjects of education, teachers and students, should view reality and should deal with the reality created by the tests, as real-life situations, even though it is not real for them.

It, indeed, distorts reality, claiming schools to prepare students for certain situations and not others, ignoring what is supposed to be real for them. They work as if “making up people” (Hacking, 1986; 1990), in a way that “numerous kinds of human beings and human acts come into being hand in hand with our invention of the categories labelling them” (Hacking, 1986: 236).

With the advance of the external tests, especially PISA test, we are undertaking a new era in Education, through which it is being transformed into competition, or in other words, in a race to prepare students for the labor market and only for this, giving visibility and legitimacy to create the group of the included and the excluded. In Foucault’s claims, each society has its own regimes of truth, “a general politics of truth that is -the types of discourse it accepts and makes function as true” (Foucault, 1980: 131-132).

Hacking (1990) states the emergence of statistics as an apparatus of giving stability to the world and supposedly making decision more transparent. PISA shows the results, comparing the countries in a statistical way, being recognized as authority and, according to Eccleston (2011: 248), with “rational legal and moral dimensions, that is, an international organization's political authority is at its zenith when its rational/technical agenda aligns with prevailing social values and sentiments”. In an age of accountability and audit culture, PISA offers international comparative measures of educational performances (Sellar & Lingard, 2013; Power, 1997; Hopmann, *et al*, 2007) which provides a new mode of governance across national and global scales (Nóvoa & Yariv-Mashal, 2003; Simola *et al*, 2011). Materialized in numbers which tell who we are in the world, PISA provides a sense of belonging or not. In Gorur’s words, “Societies are created by statistics; but, instead of using this knowledge to shape statistics to create the kinds of societies that would produce equitable and sensible societies, we appear to be willing to allow statistics to dictate what kinds of societies we create” (Gorur, 2016: 666).

According to the OECD website, PISA is capable of evaluating “inclusiveness, tolerance, trust, ethics, responsibility, environmental awareness, collaboration and effective democratic processes”. Besides, PISA completes:

*Over the past decade, the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) has become the world’s premier yardstick for evaluating the quality, equity and efficiency of school systems in providing young people with these skills.*

The idea of universality and neutrality crosses the discourse of PISA. We call attention to the passage “PISA has become the world’s premier yardstick for evaluation the quality, equity and efficiency of school systems” in relation to the skills mentioned above. All these skills are thought as universal, consequently, possible to be measured. But what is been measured is the child that carries or not these qualities, the calculating and measuring of certain aspects of the social, psychological, political qualities dictates who is the child destined to succeed or to fail and also who is the teacher who fosters or hinders achievement. The qualities measured by this yardstick are supposed to translate the complexity of human development that takes place inside standardized worldwide schools in a way to order which school, student, teacher, country is in and which is out. For those which are out, this “yardstick logically order the sequences and stages for nations to achieve the efficiency, perfection and equality” (Lindblad; Pettersson & Popkewitz, 2015: 144). The assumption was that all nations were equal and could rise to the top if they follow the recommendations and highways proposed. At the social level, the universal categories established social and psychological distinctions related to the child, family, and community that differentiated success and failure in school outcome measures. These background measures work within the systems principles of consensus and equilibrium that embodied the points of disequilibrium and pathology. It was argued that the recognition of comparing from the universal norms and distinctions provided differences and divisions. The divisions were pathologies of populations dangerous to the system’s models and highways and feared if not changed.

Another effect of meaning that can be found in the discourse of PISA is the one related to the future. In the menu bar of the Brazilian website from the INEP- Brazil, we can find Reference Guides in which it is presented the kind of knowledge is evaluated by PISA:

*Pisa is designed from a dynamic model of learning in which new knowledge and skills should be continuously acquired for a well succeeded adaptation in a world of constant change. (...) Pisa intends to go beyond the school knowledge, examining the capacity of the students analyze, ratiocinate and reflect actively about their knowledge and experiences, focusing on the competencies that will be relevant for their future lives, in the solution of daily problems.*

Practically repeating what is said about knowledge on the OECD website, the Brazilian website is very generalist, presenting knowledge as a universal concept. It also refers to the new mentality that surrounds education, that is, that the world is in constant change, so education should prepare students for these changes and a good way to certify if students are being prepared for these changes is by testing them. This way, two main effects of meaning appear in this excerpt in relation to Education, and subjects in Education: that teachers and students should be adapted to these changes, seeing them in advance and that they could be prepared to apply this knowledge on the solution of daily problems. This visionary attribute to Education dialogues with Anderson’s study (2010: 777) in which the author calls attention on “how futures are anticipated and acted on in relation to a set of events that are taken to threaten liberal democracies”. For the author, Human Geography acts in a way to govern the future by the preemption, preparedness and precaution (Anderson, 2010: 782) and he adds that these three characteristics are “therefore, caught in the

productive/destructive relation with uncertainty that characterizes liberalism". My great argument in this paper is that PISA works in a way to produce subjects in Education, which brings us to believe that one of the skills of these subjects in Education is to be prepared for the future. Not only Education and the subjects should be focused on this anticipation of the future but also PISA works as a technique of this anticipation. This is what Foucault calls as governmentality:

The ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, the calculations and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power, which has as its target population, as its principal form of knowledge political economy, and as its essential technical means apparatuses of security. The tendency which, over a long period and throughout the West, has steadily led towards the pre-eminence over all other forms (sovereignty, discipline etc) of this type of power which may be termed government, resulting, on the one hand, in formation of a whole series of specific governmental apparatuses, and, on the other, in the development of a whole complex of savoirs. (Foucault, 1991:102-103).

We are considering PISA as specified above: while an "apparatus of security," having as target the population, this is a complex form of power, with procedures, analyses, calculations, tactics with the ultimate aim, governing the economy of a country, through its education.

Governmentality is also related to power-knowledge relations inside the most complex Western society which produces new forms of discipline that generate new forms of knowledge, one imbricated in the other, constituting in Foucault's studies as the disciplinary system of microphysics of power. This is exactly what PISA does, it fabricates "the kind of person who orders and calculates the paths of the present to the future in organizing biography will bring individual and social happiness and progress" (Popkewitz, 2013: 136).

## Conclusion

The great contribution of Discourse Analysis is to provide a methodological apparatus to see the corpus shaped by the context. This is because the concept of language is of opacity, not of transparency. If discourse and subject are imbricated, one determining the other, when we analyze a discourse, we are, actually, analyzing the subject that is constructing the discourse, or better, that is constructing himself/herself through the discourse. If Discourse Analysis offers us a model to look at the discourses, the analysis also contributes to enlarge the theory.

Moving beyond the level of individual self analysis, when we focus on the social and societal relations and situate the voices of the excluded ones within a relational frame, we can reveal the background under which some subjects are produced in our society and contribute to increasing social consciousness and (who knows?) to achieving social change. I argue that each of us has a moral obligation to use the theories and research to denounce the oppressive mechanisms, especially those that are invisible, and discourse analysis is an approach that is particularly useful to investigate the relations between language and power and the ways in which goods are or ought to be distributed among people. Denouncing is our responsibility to better understand our reality.

Drawing on a post-critical perspective, engaging with Michel Foucault's idea of governmentality, and related concepts of discourse, power, and number as regimes of telling the truth and governmentality, this article discussed the theoretical grounds to understand the OECD PISA as a discursive practice. Theoretically, we understand the use of number in the OECD PISA as its regime of truth. As described by the article of Grek (2009), PISA and its effect can be



explained as governing by numbers (Hansen, 2015). With its assessment results, people internationally compare human competency and use the result as basis for political decision making. In other words, the number becomes an intelligibility which allows people to discern, understand, and fabricate of human kinds which are strongly related to politics of schooling (Popkewitz, 2011).

The findings point to some regimes of truth that make us problematize the main goal of PISA, that is, to provide a worldwide range of information to improve the education. Actually, our conclusions point to PISA discourse as a mechanism of creating new regime of truth around the globe, as it takes education as universal and homogeneous, disregarding the countries, the cultures. Instead, we postulate that PISA fabricates reality, that is, what is supposed to be taken as real life situation, materialized in numbers. Another regime of truth related to the idea of universality and neutrality that crosses the discourse of PISA is to be considered as the world's most important yardstick for the evaluation the quality, equity and efficiency of schools. We also point another regime of truth that is related to the anticipation of the future as PISA tests intend to verify how students are prepared for future problems. Who knows the future problems, we ask?

This way, we alert that, by erasing the historical conditions of knowledge and subjects, PISA discourse homogenizes and, when evaluating in a homogeneous and ranking way, it includes, at the same time that excludes, since it works with dichotomous categories: inclusion versus exclusion; uniformity versus diversity; right versus wrong; developed versus underdeveloped (or developing); productive versus nonproductive.

Another issue that our analysis points to is in relation to external evaluations, in general. This type of evaluation only ranks schools, educational systems and countries, cognitively, through the results of the tests, disregarding the context, social conditions, real life of the subjects involved, teacher and student. It is, once again, a mechanism of control and of governmentality, since they are applied by external agencies that consider the subjects of Education and the knowledge as universal and not historically constructed.

The students' achievements and learning outcomes are represented in numbers, rankings, and graphs. The way of telling the educational truth in this international event is by using numbers as medium. The numbers become a tool, language, and communication channel to global audience. The number as the truth telling medium is closely related to the elimination of the subjectivity in social science research.

Ultimately, by using standardized tests, comparing education systems across countries and presenting them as competitive rankings, the great impact of PISA discourse in Brazil and worldwide is to shape the subjects for the 21st century hierarchically as winners and losers (Niemann, Martens & Teltemann, 2017).

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