

From Adapting to Context to Engineering the Context: A Case Study of PISA in India

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International assessments like PISA are meant to be adapted to the context to maintain the validity of their tests. However, in low-income nations, we also witness the context itself being adapted to suit PISA. Using empirical data on India's preparation for PISA 2022, this paper describes the 'context engineering' exercises on the part of the both the Indian government and the OECD, arguing that context engineering is becoming a new strategy to create enduring reforms in low-income nations.

When India first participated in PISA, in the 2009+ round, it performed very badly, ranking second last in the world. It blamed the results on the PISA instruments which, it claimed, were not adapted to the Indian context. The OECD was not happy with India either, because, after all the hard work done by international aid agencies to get India to participate in PISA, India has simply dismissed the results as irrelevant and brushed them under the carpet.

After a 10-year hiatus, India has lifted the boycott and is again participating, in the 2022 round of PISA, claiming that the OECD has agreed to adapt the test to suit the Indian context (e.g., replacing 'avocado' with 'mango'). To ensure good results, the government has launched a multi-pronged effort, selecting only the best performing school systems to participate; adapting the curriculum; engaging the Khan Academy to train principals and teachers in new approaches to teaching; making provision in the timetable for PISA practice; etc. Through these extensive changes, India appears to be engineering its own 'context' to match the OECD ideal.

The OECD is also engineering the Indian context so that this time, India will not ignore the results if it performs badly. It has contracted ACER to support India's 'capacity building'. Key institutions such as the Central Board of Secondary Examinations are now deeply involved in the implementation of PISA. PISA-like competency-based approaches are becoming embedded in the bureaucratic system.

These exercises of 'context engineering' and 'capacity building' are new ways through which international agencies are interacting with a diverse range of actors within nations, penetrating the bureaucratic machinery and developing a thick network of mediators that carry their ideals and practices and translate them into everyday administrative and school practices.