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The cross-Atlantic knowledge divide; or PISA for Development: Should one size ever fit all?

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Abstract

In traditional conceptions, the Atlantic divides the New World from the Old, as well as geographically dividing the Americas from the continents of Africa and Europe; it is suggested here that beyond being at the centre of such divisions, the Atlantic itself is a divided space that can act as a microcosm in the analysis of global inequities. This article argues that the Brandt Line as a conceptual division of the Atlantic can help trace global epistemological inequities indicative of a current North-South knowledge divide. The knowledge divide between the Global North and the Global South will be discussed in the context of PISA for Development, an international student assessment developed and implemented by the OECD, which aims to assess education systems, and inform education policies and school curricula in developing countries. It will be suggested that the OECD gives precedence to the epistemological systems of the Global North over those of the Global South, by not including the respective developing countries more closely in the development process of the assessment material, and by failing to incorporate local and indigenous knowledges in the test. A sample question will be discussed in order to highlight some of the epistemological difficulties in developing a universally applicable student assessment. Additionally, it will be argued that the translation of PISA for Development as an assessment instrument plays a key role in the perpetuation of global epistemological inequities, and has therefore arguably the potential to contribute to epistemicide.

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Introduction

Knowledge, propositional and procedural, enables us to give meaning to the social world around us. At the same time, the social world around us gives meaning to the knowledge we have acquired. This dialectical relationship between the learner and the cultural and social context is what identifies epistemologies. It has knowledge at its core, but it is not determined by knowledge. The starting point of this article derives in fact from the observation that with the emergence of so called knowledge societies, knowledge is more often than not viewed as a commodity that is simply transferrable – from teacher to student, from parent to child, from country to country – thus dismissing the dialectical relationship between learner and context. This article aims to problematise the apparent simplicity of knowledge transfer by discussing some of the OECD's work in the context of education. Specifically, I will examine the most recent student assessment programme developed by the OECD, PISA for Development (PISA-D in the following, as referred to by the OECD). I will pay particular attention to the Atlantic as a conceptual space, no longer regarded as a separator between the Americas and Europe and Africa, but recognised as a divided space itself. This article suggests that it can therefore act as a microcosm for the analysis of epistemological inequality between the Global North and the Global South. In this light, the concept of the Brandt Line as a symbol of global inequities will be discussed for the purpose of illustration – this article in fact concedes that the Brandt Line, a concept originally coined by West-German Chancellor Willy Brandt in 1980 in order to account for and describe the variability of economic developments between the countries of the Global North and the countries of the Global South, allows us to

trace current global epistemological inequities that manifest themselves in what we might call a North-South knowledge divide.

The countries that have to date signed agreements with the OECD in order to participate in PISA-D include the Atlantic communities of Honduras, Guatemala, Senegal, and Panama.¹ This article proposes that the recognition and inclusion of these countries' local and indigenous knowledges in the PISA-D assessment is not only relevant within terms that would guarantee a truly global student assessment, but is also vital for broader concerns over social justice and equality. In this light, we will discuss key aspects of global (cognitive) justice as put forward by sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007), a siren voice highlighting the importance of the dialectical relationship between learner and context, echoing in many ways the educator and critical thinker Paulo Freire (1970).

PISA for Development

In 2013, the OECD's Directorate for Education and Skills, under the leadership of Andreas Schleicher, announced a new project: the expansion of the standard PISA assessment – up to this time, PISA had assessed and compared education systems in more than 80 countries and economies² across the world – in the attempt to establish a study which could successfully and feasibly be implemented in developing and emerging countries, and consequently provide both the OECD as well as those countries and economies participating in the assessment with a single measure of education quality. On the one hand, PISA-D is specifically aimed at middle-income and low-income countries that wish to implement the assessment in order to reflect on and evaluate their current education system and national education policies. On the other hand, it will also allow the OECD to generate a single global metric of education quality – a global league table, so to speak – and provide a visual representation of the effectiveness of the world's education systems and their ability to prepare children

successfully for life in the twenty-first century. In order to be cognitively suitable for the countries in which it will be implemented, the “enhancement of PISA,”³ a phrase appearing regularly in a variety of OECD publications that discuss PISA-D, will focus increasingly on children’s lower proficiency and performance levels compared to the standard study in which testing material assesses seven proficiency levels (1b, 1a, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6), whereby on average less than 10% of pupils answer levels 5 and 6 questions correctly. PISA-D will, in fact, focus on level 2 and below. Context questionnaires that assess non-cognitive outcomes will also be adjusted according to the socio-economic situation of the participating developing countries. To date, eight developing countries have confirmed their participation in PISA-D, and the first field trials in these countries were conducted in 2016. According to OECD documents, the final results of these are expected to be published in 2018, with the aim of making PISA-D fully available to developing and emerging countries as part of the standard PISA survey cycle in 2021.

In the OECD’s online blog *Education & Skills Today*, Schleicher describes the PISA instrument as “a global yardstick for measuring success in education,”⁴ implying that comparability is of vital importance to the OECD. In the case of the developing countries, this implies comparability between their national education standards, as well as comparability with all of the other countries participating in PISA. The OECD makes this possible by drawing largely on the same testing material for both assessment instruments; the organisation is, in fact, dependent on maintaining a link to the standard PISA assessment, as a consequence of which test items have to remain largely unchanged. In OECD documents available to the public there is currently little indication of the extent to which there has been or will be a critical engagement with questions over the cultural and epistemological suitability of the existing testing material. In other words, the OECD appears to assume the existing test items to be sufficiently appropriate – culturally and epistemologically – for the

context of developing and emerging countries. In this regard, Marguerite Clarke, Senior Education Specialist at the World Bank, wrote in an entry for the World Bank blog *Education for Global Development* in December 2015: “[The OECD is] seriously exploring the possibility of using suitable questions from other regional and international assessments to supplement their existing PISA questions and better flesh out the lower end of the PISA scale.”⁵ The extent to which the OECD will realistically be able to include questions from other student assessments is currently unclear, but a strict time frame in terms of the implementation of PISA-D, as well as limited financial resources suggest that it is unlikely that a large number of additional testing material will be included in the existing PISA question pool.

By way of illustration: a PISA sample question on evolution

PISA and PISA-D are longitudinal studies, as a consequence of which a significant amount of testing material is used in consecutive assessment cycles. In order to avoid biased results – due to familiarity with the material, for instance – the OECD ensures that test questions are inaccessible to the public. For the sake of transparency, however, the organisation has made some sample questions for the standard PISA assessment publicly available, describing them as representative of the actual testing material used in the study. As PISA-D will be developed from the existing catalogue of PISA test questions, we understand the sample questions as also representative of PISA-D. For the purpose of illustration, they will be treated in this spirit here.

The topic of evolution, for instance, appears in a number of PISA sample questions used for the assessment of scientific literacy. One such question concerns the evolution of the horse. One part of the test item consists of an introduction to a question, in this case a statement about fossil skeletons that are believed to be the ancestors of the present-day horse,

and a multiple-choice question with four possible answers. This multiple-choice question asks the pupil to indicate which statement “best applies to the scientific theory of evolution.”⁶ The OECD also publishes the scoring grid for each sample question, as well as a brief indication as to which competency is being assessed with the respective question. In relation to the question on evolution, the OECD stipulates that the correct answer is: “Evolution is a scientific theory that is currently based on extensive evidence.”⁷ No other responses will be awarded credit for this question. In some instances, such an answer, however, might be considered interpretative rather than factually-based. Let us consider, for example, the teaching of evolution in Muslim-majority countries. In this regard, Asghar, Hameed and Farahani, writing in 2013, describe not only the way in which evolution is taught as part of the national curriculum in a number of Muslim-majority countries, but also some underlying cognitive and epistemological concerns which arise when scientific and religious knowledge converge, as is arguably the case when theories of evolution and creationism meet:

Islam, in many Muslim societies, is essentially considered a complete code of life and therefore permeates almost every aspect of the culture. Thus, it is not uncommon to see modern scientific principles and ideas often interpreted or validated through a religious lens. Scientific knowledge, in many instances, interacts with religious and other local meaning-making systems in a myriad of ways resulting in complex negotiations between them.⁸

Asghar and her colleagues indeed indicate that the theory of evolution is taught in all of the Muslim countries they analysed (Egypt, Pakistan, Turkey, Syria and Malaysia), and generally includes, amongst other topics, the history of evolution, the concept of natural selection, and genetic mutation. Human evolution, however, is excluded from all of the national curricula and biology textbooks they examined. In relation to the sample question described above, this suggests a discrepancy between what Muslim children ought to answer

according to the OECD in order to be given credit for their response, and their reply in accordance with their understanding of evolution as taught by the respective school curriculum. In other words, for Muslim pupils, the answer “the theory of evolution is possible for animals but cannot be applied to humans”⁹ potentially best applies to the scientific theory of evolution, because the answer corresponds most closely to their knowledge system as a whole.

This sample merely serves as an illustration of the epistemological difficulties that arise when developing question material for a cross-cultural assessment tool such as PISA. There is the risk that questions are ethnocentric, and therefore inherently and intrinsically biased; arguably this is the case in the sample question discussed here. Some problems in the question material are perhaps more easily discernible – the inclusion of food items that are culturally unknown, or that are forbidden in specific cultural contexts, for instance – and can therefore be eliminated in the translations of the assessment. Epistemological differences, however, are potentially more deep-seated, less visible, and thus more difficult to bypass or counteract solely through acts of translation.

The movement of knowledge

Geographer Colin McFarlane writes in 2006 that “there is a pervasive rationalist conception of knowledge and knowledge transfer as objective, universal and instrumental.”¹⁰ McFarlane goes on to describe the way in which scholars of development studies, as well as development agencies such as the World Bank, regularly conceive of knowledge as a static, transferable entity which, on the one hand, appears to enable and support processes of development by suggesting that countries with similar values and structural systems can potentially learn from each other and, for instance, introduce policy changes accordingly, but which, on the other hand, contributes to a “vision [that] perpetuates a North-South divide,” by

which “‘poor’ countries are to draw on the knowledge of ‘rich’ countries,”¹¹ as the work of intergovernmental organisations such as the World Bank or the OECD in the field of education at times suggests. In fact, McFarlane primarily refers to the movement of applied knowledge in form of policies and knowledge of best practice, which, he suggests, travels regularly from the Global North to the Global South. This is one form of knowledge which the OECD aims to affect in the developing countries implementing PISA-D. In this regard, the organisation describes processes of “peer-to-peer exchanges with other members of the PISA global community,”¹² through which developing countries can receive guidance from those countries and economies that have participated in the standard PISA cycles in the past. At the time of writing, it remains unclear what the content of such guidance given through peer-to-peer exchanges may be, or indeed what form it might take.

In relation to the standard PISA assessment, the OECD has in the past in fact more than once been accused of educational colonialism, that is, the attempt to homogenise education according to the policies and standards held by those agents and agencies perceived of as authorities in the field of education policy making¹³— such colonialism becomes arguably all the more explicit in PISA-D, where it potentially takes on the more extreme form of knowledge colonialism,¹⁴ whereby one system of knowledge is conceived of as superior to alternative systems of knowledge. PISA-D depends on testing material primarily developed by institutions based in the OECD member states,¹⁵ the majority of which are sovereign states of the Global North; consequently, the knowledge that is being assessed is arguably not reflective of indigenous or local knowledges prevalent in the developing countries participating in the assessment, but reflective of knowledge that the institutions assigned by the OECD member states classify as relevant for life in the twenty-first century. The organisation thus perpetuates the already existing knowledge divide between the Global North and the Global South, but what is more, it potentially contributes to ongoing

epistemicide, that is, the impoverishment of existing local knowledge systems on a result of what is regarded by the OECD as the dominant knowledge system. By drawing on the historical concept of the Brandt Line, what follows will show that, inasmuch as the concept is potentially outdated in terms of its ability to describe effectively the economic divisions of the world (as famously suggested by Huntington 1996), it remains indicative of the existing North-South knowledge divide in terms of access to knowledge and quality of education, as assessed by PISA.

The Brandt Line – divisions prevail

In 1977, Willy Brandt, Chancellor of the Federal German Republic, founded the North-South-Commission, an independent body consisting of 18 countries, representing the Global North as well as the Global South. They were tasked with the analysis of international development in order to address the growing economic and social disparities between industrialised and non-industrialised countries. As a result of the Commission's work, the first Brandt Report (also North-South-Report), entitled *North-South: a programme for survival* was presented to the General Secretary of the United Nations, Kurt Waldheim, in February 1980. To this day, the concepts and proposals discussed in the Brandt Report are regarded as visionary in the field of development politics – for the first time a call was made for the *integration* of the Global South into global economics, giving agency to those countries that for so long had been dominated, directly and indirectly, by the Global North. And although hardly any of the recommendations made in the report were ever successfully implemented, the work of the North-South-Commission marked a milestone in terms of the commission's ability to bring attention to the close and complex North-South interconnection between economic development, sustainability, equality, and global peace.

One of the concepts emerging from the first Brandt Report was that of the Brandt Line. Described as an imaginary line at thirty degrees latitude north of the equator, the Brandt Line came to be understood as the signifier of the economic divide between the developed, industrialised Global North, and the underdeveloped Global South.¹⁶ When the line was added to maps, it in fact became a stark visual reminder of a world divided into two. In the discussion that follows, the current work of the OECD in the field of education will be considered within a re-imagined Brandt Line, not in terms of global economic developments, but in terms of access to quality of education.

<insert map here>

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Access to knowledge: out of school children and adolescents

The Global Education Monitoring Report, *Education for All 2000–2015: Achievements and Challenges*, published by UNESCO in 2015, states that 59 million children and 65 million adolescents are currently not receiving formal education in schools.¹⁷ The number of out of school children has increased by 2.4 million since 2010, leaving the global aspiration for universal primary education by 2015, as set out in the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, decidedly unfulfilled. What is more, and as indicated by numerous statistics, there can be no doubt that the majority of out of school children and adolescents live in areas of the Global South: children from sub-Saharan African countries – a number of which are Atlantic communities (e.g., Nigeria, Ivory Coast, Angola¹⁸) – and children from South and West Asia are far more likely never to gain access to formal education and schooling than children elsewhere in the world. In fact, in 2013, nearly three times as many out of school children were living in the Atlantic community of Nigeria (8.7 million), compared to the total number of out of school children from the countries of the Global North combined (3.2 million). In this regard, the global division between children and young people

who have the possibility and the opportunities to access knowledge¹⁹ is reminiscent of the division between the Global North and the Global South as indicated by the Brandt Line: for every one child out of school in the Global North (estimated 3.182 million), there are approximately 18 children out of school in the Global South (estimated 54.606 million); the North-South divide in terms of accessibility of knowledge through formal education could not be any clearer. The Brandt Line therefore ultimately still appears to be applicable, at least in regard to the lived reality of access to education and knowledge.

Quality of education

The standard PISA assessment seeks to assess and evaluate the extent to which education systems are able to successfully prepare children for life in the twenty-first century; the evaluation is based on the assessment of skills and knowledge of 15-year-old school children in the three PISA assessment domains: scientific literacy, mathematical literacy, and reading literacy. The knowledge assessed in the study is independent from national curricula; instead, PISA tests knowledge the OECD classifies as *general competencies*, that is, the ability to apply the knowledge acquired through formal education²⁰ to real-life situations – conceptually, this links propositional, factual knowledge to procedural knowledge. Data generated as a result of the test is ranked in league tables, accommodating a comparative reading of students' performances in all three assessment domains. The OECD states that PISA scores do not allow for an exact ranking of the participating countries and economies within the league table, which is due to the relatively small number of students being tested (around 4,500, depending on the size of the country). In this regard, the OECD declares that “the scores [...] reflect a small measure of statistical uncertainty and it is therefore only possible to report the range of positions (upper rank and lower rank) within which a country can be placed.”²¹

A brief look at results from the PISA assessment in 2012 indicate that Central Asian education systems participating in the assessment (in 2012: Shanghai, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Macao) are most successful in preparing children for life in the twenty-first century according to the OECD's understanding and use of PISA; in other words, children who are formally taught in the education systems of Central Asia are more able to apply the knowledge they acquire in school to real-life situations, as a reflection of which their mean performance score is significantly above the OECD average, as well as above the scores registered by all other participating countries and economies. The education systems of the Atlantic communities of Uruguay, Costa Rica, Brazil, Colombia, and Argentina, on the other hand, are seemingly less able to prepare their children for modern life, if PISA data²² is regarded as the point of judgement. Beyond the Atlantic communities, the North-South divide in terms of quality of education, according to data generated by PISA, can ultimately be mapped generally onto the league tables published by the OECD: children in Northern European countries, for instance, perform better than children from countries surrounding the Mediterranean. This is not to say that PISA results deserve simplistic readings; the publication of league tables does, however – albeit problematically – invite simplistic readings. Patterns emerging in PISA results have nonetheless become more explicit and have been increasingly enhanced – mainly through public debate and academic research – since the first implementation of the study in 2000. In this regard, the success of Northern European countries, as well as the dominant position of the participating countries and economies from Central Asia in the rankings have in fact caused significant public debate and have been subject to intense academic scrutiny.²³ It is significant in this regard, for instance, that Brazil's PISA success is often quoted by the OECD as pioneering, and has been described in OECD documents as an inspiration for the establishment of PISA-D.

More than one knowledge

Inasmuch as the North-South knowledge divide may be understood as a function of the unequal relationship between countries of the Global North and countries of the Global South in terms of access to knowledge and quality of education, as outlined above, the premise of this article is that such a division is based on the current conceptualisation of knowledge and general competencies as fostered by the OECD and its PISA-D study. In the context presented here, it is therefore argued that the North-South knowledge divide should be understood as a division between knowledge, as advocated by the OECD, and indigenous, local knowledges prevalent in the countries participating in PISA-D. Knowledge and general competencies, as advocated by the OECD, are defined according to and in line with the dominant epistemological systems of the Global North – in other words, epistemological systems based on what is regarded as the universal distinction between true and false, as the sample question discussed previously might indicate. In this regard, sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos argues that “[t]he epistemological privilege granted to modern science from the seventeenth century onwards, which made possible the technological revolutions that consolidated Western supremacy, was also instrumental in suppressing other, non-scientific forms of knowledges [...]”²⁴ Yet de Sousa Santos goes further by suggesting that the dominant epistemological systems of the Global North do not only depend on modern science to generate knowledge, they also include knowledge created through philosophical and theological inquiry, although arguably to a diminishing degree. Science, philosophy, and theology are therefore placed on one side of what de Sousa Santos describes as “the abyssal line” of modern Western thinking, while “knowledges rendered incommensurable and incomprehensible for meeting neither the scientific methods of truth nor their acknowledged contesters in the realm of philosophy and theology”²⁵ are placed on the other side. Following on from this argument is the assertion that knowledge is not a single entity, and that,

moreover, it is not universal. The use of the word “knowledges” reflects this multiplicity of knowledge, and is a key step in terms of the recognition of the epistemological diversity of the world. Furthermore, it is argued here that this epistemological diversity is a reflection of cultural diversity, as knowledges are culture-bound, in that the way in which children acquire, apply, reflect upon, and use knowledge is determined by their cultural background and upbringing. American psychologist Jerome Bruner indeed speaks of the need for children to be exposed to and understand the “history of knowledge,”²⁶ that is, the culture-specific context that determines the knowledge they acquire. Bruner’s pedagogy is based on the awareness for knowledge being “‘man-made’ rather than simply there.”²⁷ The implication of this, in terms of this discussion, is that the OECD fails to acknowledge and recognise the epistemological diversity of the countries participating in PISA-D, thereby paving the way for an ethnocentric *monoculture of knowledge*, as suggested by de Sousa Santos.

The knowledge PISA-D seeks to assess is conceptualised within the parameters of Northern epistemological systems; accordingly, the general competencies the study assesses are framed within the context of that knowledge. While the OECD declares that it cooperates with the countries that will take part in the assessment, no consideration is given to developing a new test in conjunction with these countries, a new test that might, for instance, be responsive to and reflective of cultural and epistemological specificities. Knowledge is, in this way, treated as a universal commodity which can and must be transferred from the Global North to the Global South, and PISA-D becomes the vehicle for this transfer. In this light, the idea of educational colonialism is suddenly not only limited to the promotion of best education policies and practices as sought by the OECD, it also encompasses knowledge colonialism, in that the Organisation appears to presume, support, and promote the existence of a single epistemological system valid for children all across the world. While scholars of development studies have long argued that policy and development knowledge consistently

travel from the countries of the Global North to those of the Global South,²⁸ as highlighted by McFarlane who describes “an implicit tendency to view the South as a mix of countries where knowledge travels *to* rather than *from*,”²⁹ little has been said about the implicit tendency of knowledge, past and present, created in the Global North to be regarded as the sole, universally valid knowledge. Indeed, international student assessments like PISA, developed in the Global North and dependent on measures and assessment tools standardised from the Global North, have the potential to foster and enforce such thinking. One brief example in this regard: in preparation for the implementation of PISA-D, the prospective participants undergo complex Capacity Needs Analysis processes, in which the OECD, in conjunction with the World Bank, assesses the capacity of individuals and national institutions to successfully implement the assessment, solve problems should they arise, and set achievable, sustainable objectives in regards to the assessment. In the Capacity Needs Analysis report for Guatemala, published in 2015, the willingness of the government of Guatemala to implement new knowledge is explicitly mentioned, and highlights the extent to which Guatemala – and potentially other developing countries participating in PISA-D – is prepared to implement curriculum changes on grounds of the assessment:

[I]t opens the door to a range of learning possibilities, a statement held by the Department of Syllabuses which declares that it is keen to learn from PISA owing to the difficulty it encounters in focusing syllabus implementation with a view to developing life skills.³⁰

The inherent danger is that the OECD’s cognitive frameworks of knowledge and general competencies become the single defining frameworks for the curricula in all countries participating in PISA-D, thereby homogenising knowledge, skills, and competencies by falsely claiming them to be universally applicable. As a result, deeply culture-bound, local

knowledges and skills are at risk of becoming increasingly trivialised and redundant, contributing to a potential flattening of epistemologies across the world.³¹

Translating PISA for Development

If PISA-D is a vehicle responsible for the transfer – and, therefore, potential imposition – of knowledge from the Global North to the Global South, then translation can be seen as the engine that allows this transfer, or imposition, to take place. In their development, cross-cultural assessments depend by their very nature on processes of translation, for, in order to be applied across different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, the assessments must be translated from the original source version into the respective national languages. PISA-D is, however, only to some extent specifically translated for the developing countries it is used in; as outlined before, some of the language versions used in the respective countries have previously been translated for the standard PISA assessment and are then culturally adapted to the context in which they will be implemented (e.g., the Spanish version in Guatemala; the French version in Senegal). The cultural adaptations are undertaken by appointed individuals and groups in the country wishing to conduct the study, and might include adjustments of specific expressions, phrases, names, and spelling conventions according to the linguistic norms of the new host country. This process is limited to the language of instruction in schools; minority languages are only taken into consideration if a country wishes to include a specific language in the assessment cycle. Senegal, for instance, wishes to implement PISA-D not only in French, but also in Arabic and Wolof. Translating PISA-D, that is, translating the testing material itself as well as the context questionnaires, coding procedures, and procedure manuals relevant to the implementation of the study, is a highly complex process, since comparability between all countries participating in the assessment can only be

guaranteed if the translations are deemed equivalent, in that they must assess the same construct – in other words, general competency – across all languages.

—Such notions of direct equivalence are, of course, deeply problematic. Accordingly, this article suggests that achieving and maintaining equivalence between all language versions of PISA-D only become possible due to the epistemologically homogenised and flattened nature of the English source version of the assessment. But what is more, it is ultimately the aspiration for comparability between all participating countries that leaves cultural and epistemological diversity unaccounted for in PISA-D, as comparisons are only statistically measurable when they are based on sameness of construct. In other words, the OECD sets standards, in terms of knowledge and general competencies, that children are expected to have in order to succeed in life in the twenty-first century, against which the countries participating in PISA-D are being compared. Thus, the knowledge and competencies assessed in the study appear to be deemed to be universal in nature, equally relevant to children from all cultural and linguistic backgrounds. An analysis of the extent to which the knowledge and competencies assessed in PISA-D are truly relevant to and reflective of knowledge and competencies that children should have acquired in order to live a successful life in the twenty-first century is not within the scope of this article; it is, however, suggested that cultural and epistemological specificities must not be eradicated from national curricula in the seemingly ever increasing endeavour to educate children towards global citizenship. To put it more succinctly, the clear acknowledgement and recognition of cultural and epistemological diversity must find a place in the future of international student assessments.

Epistemicide and translation

The reason why it is important to recognise global epistemological diversity is articulated in the argument that “there is no global justice without global cognitive justice,”³² and, as argued passionately by de Sousa Santos, that:

inquiries into ways of knowing cannot be separated from inquiries into ways of intervening in the world with the purpose of attenuating or eliminating the oppression, domination, and discrimination caused by global capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy.³³

PISA-D potentially stymies global cognitive justice developments across and beyond the North-South divide by failing to recognise that knowledge is both culture-specific, and informs culture-specific social agency. In other words, the way in which human subjects do things is inextricably linked to the way in which they acquire knowledge. Insofar as PISA-D assesses 15-year-old children and not adults, it is in formal education where significant cultural and intellectual foundations for future social experiences are laid; the implications of the development and implementation of international student assessments therefore arguably exceeds comparisons between education systems, or the promotion of best education policies. The OECD’s assessment of general competencies reflects to some extent the “Western-centric abyssal line”³⁴ which has, as in the terms of de Sousa Santos, “historically excluded large segments of populations and ideas from experiencing the world as their own and thus from actively participating in its transformation”³⁵ – and arguably continues to do so. Indeed, in similar vein, Italian scholar Vasco d’Agnese underlines that by limiting the social world to one conception of education,³⁶ as promoted by the OECD, there is the inherent danger that “we freeze, so to speak, the current form of society and the current power relationship.”³⁷ We might suggest that societal changes, transformations, developments, as well as social well-

being as such, are therefore inextricably linked to the knowledge we acquire, and the way in which we acquire this knowledge.

And so, what role does translation play in the demand for the recognition of epistemological diversity? It might be cautiously conceded that, in the context of PISA-D, the translation of the assessment contributes to epistemicide, not through active intervention on the part of translators –in the form, for example, of stylistic changes, or content adaptations of the testing material – but via the perpetuation of the epistemologically biased source material through translation. Translators may well quietly condone epistemicide, and it can be argued that translators of PISA-D contribute doubly to the marginalization of local and indigenous knowledges; firstly, as active agents, in that they choose to accept the commission to translate the assessment, and secondly, in their adherence to the strict translation criteria set by the OECD, criteria which ultimately derive from a highly problematic intended equivalence between all test versions. The “PISA 2012 Translation and Adaptation Guidelines” highlight that

[i]n order to collect internationally comparable data in the study, the equivalence of national versions is a requirement, which means that the translation of materials must meet stringent quality standards [...].³⁸

Consequently, there is little room for translators to navigate the translation of PISA-D. Accepting a commission to translate the assessment in that way raises a potential issue of ethics that many translators might well remain unaware of, given that questions over the double-edged sword of the explicit-implicit ethical elements of translation are rarely broached. To put it differently: while translation situations often carry obvious ethical implications, for which translators’ codes of conducts, for instance, prescribe appropriate practical responses, a significant degree of any translation situation is, however, ethically unregulated and therefore dependent primarily on the translator’s own ethical understanding

of the situation and its wider context. I suggest that this is in fact the case in the translation of PISA-D.

Similarly, the situation in which translators actively and deliberately adapt source texts in order to fit into the prevalent discourse model of the target culture has been discussed by translation scholar Karen Bennett. In this regard, drawing on her own experience as a translator working from Portuguese into English, Bennett notes that, in order to create products fit for purpose within the Anglo-Saxon discourse of academic publishing, significant interventions are frequently made in the translation:

Our job is, essentially, to present the alien knowledge in a form that will enable it to be assimilated into one or another of the ready-made categories existing for the purpose, which means ensuring that it is properly structured, that it makes use of the appropriate terminology and tropes – in short, couching it in the accepted discourse.³⁹

This is what Bennett describes as epistemicide, whereby “the underlying ideology of the original is very different from the dominant one,”⁴⁰ ultimately requiring the translator to intervene in order to create a translation fit for purpose. It is, paradoxically, the lack of this openly active intervention on the part of translators that characterises the PISA-D translation process, and yet the outcome is similar to the one described by Bennett: the process of translation potentially contributes – at times explicitly, at times implicitly – to the transposition of dominant worldviews onto alternative ones – in the guise of academic discourse, as highlighted by Bennett, or in the form of knowledge, as this article has been concerned to argue.

Conclusion: the Atlantic remains divided

This article has sought to highlight the extent to which PISA-D, as an international assessment of education systems in developing and emerging countries, potentially contributes to the perpetuation of global epistemological inequality, which manifests itself in the form of a North-South knowledge divide, corresponding to the Brandt Line. In this regard, it has been argued that the concept of the Brandt Line still holds symbolic value in terms of its ability to highlight significant divisions between countries of the Global North and those of the Global South in terms of access both to knowledge and quality of education, as characterised by PISA. Moreover, it has been suggested that the Atlantic, specifically the Atlantic communities participating in PISA-D, can indeed serve as a microcosm for the analysis of the global knowledge divide.

Atlantic-bordering countries, such as Honduras, Guatemala, Senegal, and Panama, have chosen to conduct an assessment of their national education systems, in which the testing material, the standards that define general competencies in mathematical literacy, scientific literacy, and reading literacy, as well as the cognitive frameworks underpinning the competencies, are all based on and grounded in the epistemological systems of the Global North. None of these communities will have contributed significantly to the development of this assessment, except for the possible inclusion of some minor linguistic adaptations inserted into the respective national test versions. Consequently, it must be inferred that the PISA-D testing material and the conceptualisation of general competencies are regarded – by the OECD, on the one hand, but seemingly also by the countries wishing to participate in PISA-D – as universal and equally applicable to children across the world, irrespective of their cultural and epistemological backgrounds. It is precisely this assumption that this article seeks to destabilise by arguing for a multiplicity of culture-bound epistemological systems. In light of de Sousa Santos' work on epistemology and global justice, it has accordingly been

argued that the recognition of the epistemological diversity of the world is not simply a matter of acknowledging cognitive differences, but more crucially a requirement of global justice.

Specifically, in connection with the Atlantic communities participating in PISA-D, the discussion has highlighted that more immediate concerns will potentially arise in the realm of curriculum developments, whereby countries participating in the assessment appear willing to implement curriculum changes in line with the content of PISA. The danger is, yet again, the formal and structural marginalisation, and indeed potential epistemicide, of local and indigenous knowledges in favour of what is perceived as the dominant knowledge system promoted by the OECD. Furthermore, this consideration of the Atlantic as a microcosm for the study of such epistemological inequities allows us to develop a broader understanding of the potential implications of PISA-D not only in terms of national curriculum and policy changes, but also in terms of global epistemological diversity. The Atlantic remains a divided space, where the North-South knowledge divide, traced along the imaginary Brandt Line, persists in real terms in relation to access to knowledge and quality of education. But, beyond this, we must interrogate the role that international student assessments, like PISA-D, play in how knowledge is conceptualised, assessed, and potentially transferred across both the North-South divide, and the Atlantic. The OECD carries an ethical and social responsibility towards the countries participating in PISA-D, and by implying that knowledge generated in Northern epistemologies is universal, the organisation is at danger of perpetuating inequities between the Global North and the Global South.

Notes

¹ Also Cambodia, Paraguay, Senegal, Zambia.

² The distinction between countries and economies is necessary, as some of the PISA participants are not sovereign nation-states but administrative or economic areas; for example, Shanghai, Macao, Taiwan.

³ For example OECD, “PISA for Development: Enhancement,” 2016.

⁴ Schleicher, *OECD Education & Skills Today*, paragraph 9.

⁵ Clarke, *Education for Global Development*, paragraph 6.

⁶ OECD, “Take the Test,” 241.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 241.

⁸ Asghar, Hameed, and Farahani, “Evolution in Biology Textbooks,” 2.

⁹ OECD, “Take the Test,” 241.

¹⁰ McFarlane, “Knowledge, learning and development,” 290.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 293.

¹² OECD, “Improving learning outcomes worldwide,” 4.

¹³ Vasco d’Agnese’s critical engagement with PISA leads the scholar to describe the study as a *life brand*, not just an assessment instrument. His argument centres around similar ideas to those put forward in this paper, for instance the hegemonic position of the OECD in framing and defining the parameters for what constitutes a successful life. D’Agnese’s passionate critique of PISA and the OECD is underlined by the emotive language the scholar uses in his discussion. In similar terms, in an open letter addressed to Andreas Schleicher, published in *The Guardian* on 6 May 2014, 89 academics, education practitioners, and teachers from countries of the Global North (Ireland, UK, US, Australia, New Zealand etc) express their concerns over PISA rankings, one of which is indeed the concern over educational colonialism.

¹⁴ See Shahjahan “Decolonizing the Evidence-Based Education” for a discussion of this specifically in terms of education policies. The scholar speaks, similarly to de Sousa Santos, of “the promotion of colonial hierarchies of knowledge and monocultures of the mind” (abstract).

¹⁵ The institutions involved in the development of PISA 2012 are ACER (Australian Council for Educational Research), University of Melbourne (Australia), aSPe (Analysis of Systems and Practices in Education; University of Liege, Belgium), DIPF (German Institute for International Educational Research), IPN (Leibniz-Institute for Science and Mathematics Education) and Heidelberg University (all three in Germany), NIER (National Institute for Educational Policy Research, Japan), CRP-HT (Public Research Centre Henri Tudor, Luxembourg), ILS (Department of Teacher Education and School Research, University of Oslo, Norway), and ETS (Education Testing Service, US)(OECD, “PISA 2012 Technical Report,” 35). ACER has been involved in the PISA developing process since the study was first established in 1997, the other institutions were commissioned over the years.

¹⁶ The Brandt Line as well as the notions of Global North and Global South must be understood as abstract concepts that allow us to broadly depict global inequities in a simplified manner. Although situated in the Global North, Australia and New Zealand, for instance, are in fact part of the Global South in terms of economic and political development. The perhaps reductive nature of these concepts should, however, not lead to their scholarly dismissal as they continue to hold descriptive and representational value beyond the realm of economics and public governance, as this article suggests. The map depicting the North-South-Divide indicates the (imagined) location of the Brandt Line.

¹⁷ This information is based on UIS data collected in 2013.

¹⁸ The Republic of Congo, also an Atlantic community of the African continent, should also appear in this list. Unfortunately, due to the complex political conflict and the current social situation in the country, no official data for the number of out of school children and adolescents is available.

¹⁹ For the past decade, the concept of access to knowledge (see also *A2K movement*) has regularly been discussed in terms of intellectual property rights and copyrights concerns, mostly in relation to data and academic outputs published online. See for example Krikorian and Kapczynski, *Access to Knowledge in the Age of Intellectual Property*. In the context of this article, access to knowledge is reconceptualised in order to describe the very premise of what schooling and formal education are concerned with: unhindered access to knowledge for children and young people.

²⁰ The role informal education (in other words, the hidden curriculum outside of formal education) plays is not accounted for in OECD documents.

²¹ <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/aboutpisa/pisafaq.htm>.

²² All information and analysis based on data from PISA 2012.

²³ One of many publications in this regard is the comparison between the PISA success of Central Asian countries and economies, and Australia, Germany, and South Korea offered by Waldow, Takayama, and Sung, “Rethinking the pattern.” Similarly, Reinikainen’s book chapter “Amazing PISA Results” offers an analysis of the Finnish success in PISA. These are only two out of a multiplicity of articles that have been published in relation to the PISA success of Central Asian and Northern European countries and economies.

²⁴ de Sousa Santos, *Another Knowledge is Possible*, xiv.

²⁵ de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South*, 120.

²⁶ Bruner, *The Culture of Education*, 61.

²⁷ Ibid.,6.

²⁸ In this regard, McFarlane discusses the concept of translation in the context of development studies, not in terms of the role of translation in linguistic transfers, but in terms of its embodiment as “a sense of creative possibility that does not reduce [development] learning to direct transfer” (“Border crossings,” 24). Accordingly, McFarlane conceptualises translation as a process of transformation, not a process of simple transfer.

²⁹ McFarlane, “Border crossings,” 1419.

³⁰ OECD and World Bank, “Capacity Needs Analysis: Guatemala,” 20.

³¹ The extent to which changes to a national curriculum will be implemented as a result of the content of PISA for Development cannot be accounted for at present, but should certainly invite further research.

³² de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South*, viii.

³³ Ibid., 238.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 240.

³⁶ In his article, d’Agnese speaks of education as opposed to knowledge. Since education can be perceived of as the transmission of knowledge, inside and outside of formal schooling, both terms are signified here with the same semantic meaning.

³⁷ d’Agnese, “PISA’s colonialism,” 69.

³⁸ OECD, “PISA 2012 Translation and Adaptation Guidelines,” 5.

³⁹ Bennett, “Epistemicide!,”154.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

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