

# Book Review: *Improving National Education Systems After COVID-19: Moving Forward After PIRLS 2021 and PISA 2022*, Nuno Crato and Harry Anthony Patrinos. Springer, 2025. ISBN 978-3-031-69283-3 (hardcover).

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The devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted global health, but what about the pandemic's influence on education systems worldwide? In Nuno Crato and Harry Anthony Patrinos' (2025) book, *Improving National Education Systems After COVID-19: Moving Forward After PIRLS 2021 and PISA 2022*, they attempt to investigate the impact of the pandemic on student learning and performance by discussing outcomes of the 2022 PISA and 2021 PIRLS international student assessment results from a selection of countries in Europe, Africa, and the Americas.<sup>12</sup> The editors curated each chapter to feature one country; the authors of each chapter dissect the recent national student performances and results of the PISA and PIRLS assessments. Then, the chapter authors analyze reasons and factors behind local or national student performance trends and summarize related policies, especially remedial policies, that could support and improve the quality of education and students' learning performance. Overall, this book pinpoints important international trends in student learning that are impacted by the pandemic; each chapter also offers a dissection of the reasons behind student learning loss in each country and discusses education policies for improvement. Yet the sampling of countries for discussion in this book places unequal focus on specific regions, which could be expanded, while further paths of inquiry could include longitudinal research to follow students' post-pandemic learning outcomes and analyze the effects of remedial policies.

In the introduction chapter, the editors discuss an overall trend of decrease in student learning and performance after COVID-19 across many countries; they contend that the decline was observable before the pandemic but accelerated afterward. This chapter highlights an urgent need to address this learning loss by stressing that education quality needs to be improved across various educational systems. For the consecutive chapters, the editors leave room for authors to pinpoint the actual realities of the situation locally and nationally for each educational system and country. These chapters elicited important factors that contribute to quality teaching and increased student learning. The editors also summarized helpful policies or educational techniques that were effective for several countries to contemplate more diverse

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<sup>1</sup> The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is an international evaluation that measures 15-year-old students' skills in reading, mathematics, and science from approximately 81 countries. It is organized every three years by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD),

<sup>2</sup> PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) is conducted every five years by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA); it evaluates fourth-grade students' reading comprehension from approximately 57 countries and 8 benchmarking participants.

and effective educational policies in the aftermath of COVID-19.

Diving into each chapter, it can be seen that different country categories are being showcased: European countries (England, Estonia, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain), countries in the Americas (Chile, Ecuador, the United States), and an African country (South Africa). These countries were chosen to represent different education systems, to examine diverse assessment outcomes, and to represent different post-pandemic educational policies. Discussions of the sampling of countries will be discussed further in later sections.

By juxtaposing the main points from different countries, it is apparent that similarities arise, and most of the chapters observe several related dominant trends: First, countries with significant student achievement loss or declining student performance similarly experienced more extended school closures due to COVID-19. Students from countries that did not move classes online and experienced a direct halt in formal education suffered the most. Next, several countries with grade inflation issues during the pandemic made it difficult for educators to spot learning difficulties. Online instruction also created problems in pedagogy; for instance, educators were not able to fully track students' learning difficulties. Also, across countries, students with socioeconomic disadvantages showed more learning loss than those with socioeconomic advantages. These similar challenges reflect the international trend of educational inequality and provide a basis for identifying common problems, such as a lack of educational resources, that can be compared systematically to inform future policies.

To address the declining trend of learning outcomes, many chapters delineate pedagogical methods and educational policies to meet this challenge. The specific improvement and suggestions for education policies and methods include remedial education policies such as tutoring for loss of schooling due to COVID-19 closure, funding and policies supporting teachers, and strengthening continuous assessments without grade inflation. Estonia, an example of a country that performed relatively well on the international assessments, had several notable policies for further reference: One is addressing equity in education. Another is implementing continuous assessment so Estonian educators can monitor student progress. Furthermore, educators are ready to assist when evaluations show students are in need of support. All of the above policies offer suggestions for improving the quality of pedagogy in various countries. However, the actual cross-national implementation of these abovementioned policies may still depend on the contextual system of each country and the resources available. It is important to draw from comparative educational research on the context-specific education systems for implementing appropriate policies for each country.

One point to note is that this book has a more spotlighted sampling of European countries, while no chapters focus on, for example, Asian countries or several other regions, and only one chapter covers a country in Africa. Though this book attempts to sample diverse countries with different educational systems and policies, it should be noted that only one country from Africa is included, while several regions are not discussed. Although some regions are not included in the PISA and PIRLS assessments and thus were not sampled in this book, it might be constructive to discuss countries from other regions that also participated in the assessments to obtain a more diverse palette of different educational systems. A more detailed explication of the selection methods in this book would be helpful, especially for comparative education, because it would include more evidence about student learning challenges and enhance understanding of post-pandemic policies. Policies from more diverse countries could illuminate alternative methods for alleviating post-pandemic academic loss that are appropriate for different education contexts.

Despite the above, overall, this book contributes to comparative education in the following dimensions. First, the book adds value to existing PISA and PIRLS research in discussing students with different performance levels. Oftentimes, the PISA and PIRLS news reports focus on top-performing students, and many journal article analyses pinpoint discussion on educational policies and students in high-performing countries. However, in this book, an attempt to shed light on local students' plight and struggles from

several countries facing significant student learning loss is vital for viewing and analyzing students' learning outcomes globally.

Next, this book contributes to educational scholarship by directly confronting the problem of an overall decreasing trend in student learning and performance. It does not eschew the problem to delve deeper into analyzing contributing factors for this learning outcome decline. By organizing each chapter while comparing and summarizing diverse national education policies, practical and supportive educational policies that may alleviate the learning outcome decrease trend come into focus. The editors call for improved education policies and more systematic and frequent evaluations of student performance at the local and national levels. Moreover, this book offers a vital snapshot of students' education progress after the pandemic. It will be worthwhile to continue this research topic; further lines of inquiry could perhaps pursue a longitudinal investigation to follow up on the long-term effects of student performance after COVID-19's impact.

In the wake of the catastrophic aftermath of a global pandemic, an attempt by this book to systematically analyze the educational results and the pandemic's reverberations in different countries is worthwhile. I recommend this book for readers interested in comparative education because it has educational policy implications for educators, educational institutes, and students/parents similarly affected by this global pandemic.

The comparative lens of this book is crucial in demonstrating the reality of many countries struggling with the pandemic and aiming to delineate solutions for student learning problems. The editors and the authors provide suggestions and solidarity for educators by illustrating that others are also working on enhancing the quality of education. Although students and educators have been affected by the pandemic, this book helps us recognize that we do not walk alone in fighting its negative ramifications and striving for further improvement in education worldwide.