Governments need to look beyond education rankings and focus on inequities in the system


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The latest Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA) results will be released around the world on December 6. And as usual, there will be a flurry in the news media.

Australia will likely have dropped further in the rankings which test 15 year olds in reading, maths and scientific literacy. And if so, it will be in keeping with the trend over the last several cycles.

Some hand-wringing will occur over what our students are not able to do, and how far behind Shanghai and Korea – to name a few – they are.

The rankings, which are based on the average performance of all the test-takers in Australia, attract the most attention.

But the real stories on which we should focus are the within-country variations that are obscured by global rankings.

**The real story: inequity in our education system**

Australia’s rankings conceal wide variations in performance.
Some states and territories perform much better than others. In PISA 2012 – the last reported PISA cycle – the Australian Capital Territory, Western Australia, New South Wales and Queensland scored significantly higher than the OECD average in maths literacy, but Tasmania and the Northern Territory performed significantly below the OECD average.

The difference in scores between the highest and lowest performing states represents a significant 1.5 years of schooling. Similar differences exist in reading and in scientific literacy.

The average scores for Indigenous students in maths literacy was 417 points in PISA 2012, compared with the non-Indigenous average of 507, pointing to serious inequity. This difference represents 2.5 years of schooling. The gap is again similar in reading and in scientific literacy.

Another story that does not always make it to the headlines is that of difference between types of school.

In PISA 2012, students in independent schools scored significantly higher than students in government schools. Students in Catholic schools also scored higher than government school students.

Outcomes were also lower for students in remote and rural schools.

These important differences are obscured when we only look at Australia’s ranking on global league tables.

**The mismatch between the evidence and the policies**

When we look beyond rankings, the evidence does not point to a widespread, national crisis in Australian education, as the media often report.

The sustained variations in performance, with some states, schools and groups of students performing significantly better than others, points to the need for a targeted and focused, strategic policy approach to tackle inequity.

Over the past decade, however, significant and expensive reforms have been at a national scale rather than focused and targeted initiatives to reduce inequity.

The most significant of these have been:

- The introduction in 2008 of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), replacing statewide tests that previously tracked student progress

- The introduction of the My School website in 2010 to provide comparative information on schools nationwide

- The introduction, in 2014, of the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership which has developed national professional standards for teachers.
Many of these reforms have their origins in the Rudd-Gillard government’s “Education Revolution” of 2008, which placed education at the heart of the “productivity agenda”.

Although Gillard expressed the concern to reduce inequity, the vision at the heart of the Education Revolution was for,

“Australia to become the most educated country, the most skilled economy and the best trained workforce in the world”.

Introducing the Education Revolution, Kevin Rudd cited a study that found that,

“countries able to achieve literacy scores 1% higher than the international average will increase their living standards by a factor of 1.5% of GDP per capita”.

This view of education as being the key to winning a global economic race has made rankings on international league tables an obsession in Australian politics.

And Australia’s declining ranking on these league tables has only served to heighten this obsession.

**Policies not working**

These sweeping, costly national reforms do not appear to be working.

Australia’s performance on PISA has been declining since 2003, and has made no gains in Trends in Mathematics and Science Studies (TIMSS) – the other major international assessment in which it participates.

There have been no sustained improvements in performance on national tests either.

Indeed, there is evidence that the widespread reforms across the nation – particularly the controversial NAPLAN and My School – have likely contributed to a range of negative consequences, not least of which are the de-professionalisation of teachers and the high attrition rates in teaching.

And significantly, inequities continue to exist.

**Looking beyond the rankings headlines**

Instead of the national rhetoric of “plummeting performance” that is likely to dominate the media tomorrow, we should be celebrating how well some of the states perform, and resolve to focus seriously on remedying the inequities across them.

The inequitable outcomes for Indigenous students, the gap in performance between urban schools and remote and rural schools, the variation in performance and reported confidence between males and females, and the differences between sectors are all issues that deserve focused policy attention.
At best international rankings are a distraction – but basing policies on the rankings while ignoring the more important evidence these international surveys present is unlikely to address the key issue of inequity in our system.