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Measuring and misrepresenting the missing millions: the OECD's assessment of out-of-school youth in PISA for Development

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ABSTRACT

PISA for Development (PISA-D) was a pioneering pilot project designed to make PISA, which compares the performance of 15-year-olds in school, more suitable for low- and middle-income countries. This would allow the OECD to move beyond its traditional focus on more affluent nations and to play a central role in monitoring the Sustainable Development Goals. PISA-D was declared a success by the OECD, and its most innovative feature was that, unlike PISA, its assessment included out-of-school youth (OOSY). We analyse that strand of the assessment focussing on who was assessed. We argue that the inclusion of OOSY has been misrepresented by the OECD. Building on the literature on the OECD's sources of legitimacy and applying Suchman's framework for analysing organisational legitimacy, we portray its shifting definitions of OOSY as a tactical move that allowed it to ensure the project's success and resolve problems that challenged its sources of legitimacy.

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Introduction

As the education agenda of global agencies changed after 2015 to emphasise minimum standards of quality for all countries to be delivered by 2030, the OECD has sought to expand its most successful comparative instrument, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), to include low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). In 2014, it introduced PISA for Development (PISA-D) as the means to establish PISA as a universal measure of learning and, in 2020, it declared PISA-D a success. The most innovative feature of PISA-D was the inclusion of out-of-school youth (OOSY) in the assessment. This would strengthen the OECD's legitimacy as the organisation which could monitor Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4. However, the OECD faced

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a potential crisis of legitimacy as serious problems emerged in implementing the OOSY assessment. We explore how the OECD responded to repair its legitimacy, focusing on the shifting definitions of OOSY. Drawing on Suchman's (1995) framework for analysing organisational legitimacy that distinguishes between pragmatic, moral and cognitive approaches, we identify how the OECD employed these approaches to repair and contain the threat to its legitimacy. We argue that while the OECD effectively limited the damage to its legitimacy, in so doing it misrepresented both the assessment and its capacity to achieve its stated goals. We suggest that PISA-D, particularly in its assessment of OOSY, undermined its three sources of legitimacy, namely, to accurately measure OOSY (cognitive legitimacy); to help the disadvantaged (moral legitimacy); and to provide participating nations with novel data that would help improve their education policies (pragmatic legitimacy).

The inclusion of OOSY was a novel development, as PISA had previously only been administered to pupils aged 15 in schools. In many LMICs, rather large proportions of 15-year-olds, especially the most disadvantaged among them, are not enrolled in school. Consequently, data based on school populations has been viewed as less relevant due to a limited and unrepresentative sample of 15-year-olds (Bloem, 2013). The OECD (2013, p. 1) also noted that '[a]n assessment that ignored the out-of-school is at risk of perversely encouraging policies of exclusion'. It was therefore decided that PISA-D should include 'plans to assess out-of-school 15-year-olds in order to gather information about their socioeconomic background, schooling history and current situation, as well as information about their cognitive performance' (OECD, 2013, p. 2).

Five countries participated in the PISA-D out-of-school pilot project, namely, Guatemala, Honduras, Panama, Paraguay and Senegal. In the report entitled *PISA for Development Out-of-School-Assessment: Results in Focus*, the OECD (2020, p. 2) praised these countries' bravery in 'comparing themselves internationally' and 'going an extra mile' to capture 'the skills and circumstances of the most disadvantaged children and youth in their populations'. It claimed that through PISA-D, the OECD had ensured that OOSY are 'no longer beyond the reach of programmes that focus on evaluating the readiness of young people for their full participation in society' (ibid.). The implications of the PISA-D out-of-school assessment for the attainment of the SDGs generally and especially for OOSY were also highlighted at the event marking the closure of the PISA-D project:

What PISA-D out-of-school assessment has shown is we can do that! We can actually build reliable assessment to assess the learning outcomes of young people who are no longer in school. This works. It works well and provides reliable data. [...] We hope that this will become part of the culture of PISA that we no longer just limit our look to those in school but that we take this inclusive approach and look at everybody's skills. I also think that these results really reveal the full extent of the global learning crisis now. [...] responses really need to focus on the most disadvantaged, excluded and certainly not just on those who are in school. (Schleicher 3 December 2020)

PISA-D has been subject to increasing critical attention in recent years, but the existing scholarship has generally focused on analysing the cognitive tests and contextual questionnaires used (respectively referred to as Strands A and B) (e.g. Addey & Gorur, 2020; Auld et al., 2020; Camilla et al., 2020; Gorur et al., 2019; Kaess, 2018; Rutkowski & Rutkowski, 2021). This paper critically analyses the OECD's work on PISA-D to

understand its approach to incorporating OOSY in the assessment, which was designated Strand C. The OOSY population is a geographically dispersed group that presents considerable challenges to any researcher seeking to access them (Carr-Hill, 2015). Given this, we ask who the OECD assessed. More specifically, we ask how the OECD defined the target population of PISA-D Strand C, what the sampling frame was, and whether they were accurately represented in the PISA-D OOSY sample.

The significance of those questions extends beyond the technical issues related to sampling and methodology to actual challenges to organisational legitimacy. The OECD's mainly discursive sources of legitimacy have been described in a significant body of critical literature. In the following, we bring these studies together and extend beyond them by drawing on Suchman's framework, which identifies the multiple interacting strategies that organisations use to construct and defend their legitimacy. We suggest that PISA-D was central to a broader strategy employed by the OECD to create legitimacy for its role as a monitor of SDG 4, for which the inclusion of OOSY was critical. If successful, the OECD would be well positioned to engage in monitoring the SDGs globally and become a leading organisation in the arena of education and international development (Addey, 2017, Auld et al. 2019; Li & Auld, 2020). This is an arena in which the OECD has not been a key player, as it has primarily focused on measuring student performance among the more affluent nations. However, as serious challenges have emerged in implementation, the OECD has had to tactically deal with them to repair any potential damage to its legitimacy.

Organisational legitimacy and legitimation strategies

The literature on the OECD's sources of legitimacy is informed by a range of interpretations. For example, its legitimacy has been described as deriving from 'the power of numbers' (Grek, 2009; Martens, 2007); its 'bureaucratic character' (Sharman, 2012); its role as policy 'knowledge brokers' (Bloem 2015; Niemann & Martens, 2018); its use of 'media' (Grey & Morris, 2018; Hamilton, 2017); 'the promise of the future' (Berten & Kranke, 2022; Robertson, 2022); its 'scientific expertise' (Zapp, 2020); and its use of 'strategic narratives' (Auld & Morris, 2021). While accurate, these portrayals have tended to identify discrete and singular sources that are not synthesised in such a way that recognises the multiple, interacting and shifting sources of legitimacy. We adopt Suchman's (1995) framework, which provides a more holistic approach for analysing the multiple sources of organisational legitimacy and the means by which such legitimacy is constructed and repaired.

In his seminal work, Suchman (1995, p. 574) defines legitimacy as 'a generalised perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed systems of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions'. This definition positions legitimacy as being dependent on a collective audience who (inter)subjectively construct it, but it also recognises the role of organisational actors in both constructing and repairing an organisation's legitimacy (see Li & Morris, 2022 for a detailed discussion). Based on this definition, Suchman identifies three major forms of legitimacy and suggests that they coexist in most real-world settings to create organisational legitimacy: *pragmatic legitimacy*, which is based on audience self-interest; *moral legitimacy*, which is based on normative evaluation; and *cognitive legitimacy*, which is

based on comprehensibility and the characteristic of being taken for granted. In the context of this paper, pragmatic legitimacy arises when countries perceive participation in PISA-D to be beneficial or when the OECD is seen as being responsive to their needs. The moral legitimacy of the OECD is promoted by associating PISA-D with the SDGs and specifically with disadvantaged groups in society. Cognitive legitimacy is derived by framing PISA-D within prevailing cultural models and their associated discourses, such as globalisation, evidence-based policy-making, the learning crisis and the 'knowledge economy'.

In applying Suchman's framework, we portray PISA-D as a macro-level exercise designed to legitimate the OECD's extension of PISA into LMICs and to establish its role in a new arena. The incorporation of OOSY in the assessment was taken as a key micro-level endeavour in pursuit of that end and, if not done properly, would challenge aspects of organisational legitimacy. For example, not assessing sufficient OOSY would debase the quality of the OECD's products and services; this would also damage the OECD's moral claims with regard to monitoring the attainment of the SDGs and promoting an inclusive approach. In parallel, at the cognitive level, this would challenge the entire logic behind the novelty and value of PISA-D. Overall, the successful identification and assessment of OOSY was vital to ensuring its legitimacy. This would require the OECD to either address the considerable difficulties of accessing OOSY or to find a tactical solution for obscuring the many challenges to its legitimacy.

Suchman (1995) also analyses how organisations respond to challenges to their legitimacy and identifies three broad approaches: (a) offer normalising accounts; (b) restructure; and (c) don't panic. He suggests that although legitimacy crises may coalesce around performance issues, most challenges ultimately rest on failures of meaning, where 'audiences begin to suspect that putatively desirable outputs are hazards, that putatively efficacious procedures are tricks, or that putatively genuine structures are facades' (*ibid.*, 597). Consequently, the initial task in mending a breach of legitimacy is generally 'to formulate a normalising account' that separates the threatening revelation from larger assessments of the organisation as a whole. He identifies 'justifications' and 'explanations' as the two principle types of normalising accounts. Suchman also notes that organisations may also repair their legitimacy through micro-level strategic restructuring. In this sense, 'narrowly tailored changes that mesh with equally focused normalising accounts can serve as effective damage-containment techniques' (*ibid.*, 598).

To understand what challenges the OECD has encountered and how it has managed to address them, we first draw on two categories of documents: the first category includes the UNICEF and UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) publications on the Out-of-School Children Initiative (OOSCI)¹ and Lewin's (2011) work with the Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transitions and Equity (CREATE) initiative, which provided the standard approaches to identifying OOSY and describing their characteristics that PISA-D would later draw on. The second are the OECD publications that explain the PISA-D out-of-school sample design and selection plans² and present the final results.³ We further draw on interviews with the following three respondents: a key member of the PISA-D team at the OECD, a technical expert who has conducted OOSY surveys, and a lead analyst from one of the piloting nations.

We argue that, as an organisation with no experience in assessing OOSY and working in poorer nations, the OECD was faced with a 'disruptive event' (Suchman, 1995), as it

found itself unable to effectively sample youth based on its initial definition. This event, if not immediately addressed, would interrupt its ongoing PISA-D legitimisation activities and could severely deplete its long-term legitimacy. We demonstrate that the OECD pursued a normalising strategy that was in line with Suchman's analysis of how organisations respond to such potential legitimacy crises by tailoring and justifying the way that OOSY were defined and by minimising the coverage of its tactical changes. Consequently, it avoided addressing the many problems faced by researchers in assessing OOSY by quietly imposing a sampling frame that matched its available sources of data and its established methodologies.

The analysis builds on our earlier work, which identified the broader strategies that the OECD employed to create legitimacy to monitor SDG 4 (Li & Morris, 2022) and extends that work by focusing on legitimacy maintenance and repair work. It also contributes to the important work of others who have critiqued the validity and impact of various assessments undertaken by global agencies, for example, TIMSS (Ercikan and Koh 2005), PIRLS (Strietholt et al., 2013), PISA (Högberg & Lindgren, 2022; Rivas & Guillermo Scasso, 2021), PISA for Schools (Lewis & Lingard, 2022), the OECD's measure of creativity (Grey & Morris, 2022), and the World Bank's claims concerning teacher absenteeism (Bennell, 2022).

Below, we elaborate on the characteristics of OOSY, focusing on why they are important and how they are defined by existing approaches. We then discuss the OECD's approach to redefining OOSY in response to 'an unfolding legitimacy crisis' (Suchman, 1995), which they initially claimed (OECD, 2017) was based on the work of UNICEF and UIS. They also later referenced (OECD, 2020) the work of Lewin (2011) and the CREATE project. This discussion will be followed by an examination of the resulting sampling frame, namely, the 'six zones of exclusion' employed by the OECD to represent the entire OOSY population in the piloting nations.

Significance and institutionalised definitions of OOSY

Millions of children and youth across the globe are not enrolled in school, and highlighting this fact provides a combination of pragmatic, moral and cognitive rationales for its significance (Suchman, 1995). The UIS data for 2018 show that approximately 258 million children and youth are out of school, including 59 million children of primary school age and 62 million of lower secondary school age. This group constitutes a large proportion of the 'poorest of the poor' (Carr-Hill, 2013), and they often reside at 'the bottom of the pyramid' (Wagner et al., 2018). According to Winthrop and Anderson Simons (2013), most large-scale assessments are not designed to address the learning challenges faced by out-of-school children or youth, and nearly all international and regional assessments omit out-of-school children from their sampling frames. Carr-Hill (2013) estimated that 250 million are missed worldwide from the sampling frames of such programmes and from many censuses, and their omission may lead to substantial biases.

In 2010, UNICEF and UIS jointly developed the Out-of-School Children Initiative (OOSCI) with the aim of supporting countries in identifying out-of-school children (OOSC) and describing their characteristics. They define OOSC as 'any children of primary or lower-secondary school age who are not enrolled in education'⁴ (UNICEF,

and UNESCO Institute for Statistics UIS, 2015, p. 21). Specifically, the OOSCI approach identifies five dimensions of exclusion: (1) children of preprimary school age who are not in preprimary or primary school; (2) children of primary school age who are not in primary or secondary school; (3) children of lower secondary school age who are not in primary or secondary school; (4) children who are in primary school but at risk of dropping out; and (5) children who are in lower secondary school but at risk of dropping out.

As illustrated above, these dimensions span two different population groups: children who are not in school and those who are in school but at risk of dropping out across three levels of education (preprimary, primary and lower secondary). The latter group is considered because they may be excluded from education due to discriminatory practices or attitudes within the school (UNICEF, and UNESCO Institute for Statistics UIS, 2015). This categorisation does not consider those children who are in school but are not in the appropriate grade for their age (e.g. overage or grade repeaters) as OOSC. Essentially, the OOSCI approach emphasises the rights of children to have access to basic education.

The Consortium for Educational Access, Transitions and Equity (CREATE) initiative at the University of Sussex also focused on exclusion from basic education and described it as a process that culminates in multiple causalities. From this perspective, initial access has little meaning unless it is linked to high attendance rates, positive progression through grades, basic learning outcomes, a transition to lower secondary schooling, gender equity and quality consistency among schools (Lewin, 2011). Based on this, CREATE uses the term ‘zones of vulnerability/exclusion’ to locate the range of children who have been denied access and who are at risk of dropping out. A key concept of this approach is ‘silent exclusion’, and their working definition is: ‘children at risk of dropping out [are] those who are attending less than 90% of timetabled time, are over age by two years or more, have repeated more than one year of school and who are performing two or more grades below the norm in language and mathematics’ (Lewin, 2011, p. 28). While serving to highlight the precarity of many children in schools and the implications for policy, this is not intended as a definition of OOSY, as adopting that definition would, based on the PISA-D results, categorise most children in school as OOSY. The PISA-D results found that overall, of those who took part in the school-based assessment of mathematics, only 12.2% were at level 2, the basic proficiency level (OECD, 2020).

Challenges and shifting definitions for OOSY

The target population of PISA is 15-year-olds who are in grade 7 or above.⁵ PISA-D was designed to assess the same population but extend it to include those 15-year-olds who are out of school. Thus, their original portrayal of OOSY was clearly specifically concerned with enrolment and access to schooling:

In most OECD countries, enrolment in school at age 15 is nearly universal, and schooling is compulsory until approximately that age. However, in many LMICs, relatively large proportions of 15-year-olds are *not enrolled in school* and are therefore not eligible to sit the PISA test. The PISA-D project is establishing methods and approaches to include OOSY in the PISA assessment as part of the OECD’s efforts to make the survey more relevant to LMICs

and to help develop more inclusive education policies and programmes. (OECD, 2016a, p. 1, our emphasis)

The successful inclusion of OOSY was critical to ensure the OECD's multiple forms of legitimacy. At the pragmatic level, countries such as Cambodia initially showed 'substantial interest', on the grounds that 'the proposed programme design complements its Non-Formal Education National Action Plan' (Cartwright, 2016, p. 12) and Panama decided to participate to 'avoid blind spots' because 'utilising a sample of students who attend school to draw conclusions regarding the entire educational system of the country could lead to incorrect interpretations' (Ministry of Education, 2020, Slide 4).

However, the OECD faced serious challenges in implementing that particular component. The targeted OOSY population is a small and geographically dispersed group; based on demographic statistics, 15-year-olds in the piloting nations comprise approximately 2.2% (i.e. 1 in 45) of the population and belong to a household with an average size of between 4 and 5 members (Carr-Hill, 2015). Assessment of this group cannot be conducted in schools by definition, so the out-of-school assessment used household surveys and locally recruited staff to travel to households and administer the survey on a one-on-one basis, using a tablet (OECD, 2016a). Carr-Hill (2015, p. 3) estimated that the size of this population means that 'the project would need to visit approximately 10 households to find one 15-year-old'.

Moreover, this population is mainly located in marginal, vulnerable areas, such as isolated rural areas and urban slums, which are difficult to access. One of our interviewees explained the problems they experienced as follows:

[...] it really was not a mission to implement the assessment because you are going to the areas of difficult access, and in Panama, we actually have a raining season and so during this raining season, the water gets so high that you are not able to access. PISA-D out-of-school component was done with tablets [smile], you can just imagine like tablets, raining season, rising river, difficult access. (Lead Analyst Interview #1 by authors, 2018)

Paraguay had similar problems, as can be seen in the following:

We were dealing with a target population that was mostly moving and working; they either required unusual survey hours or several visits to arrange and complete the assessments. Despite the large number of households we visited, we did not manage to reach the expected number of effectively interviewed youth. (National Project Manager, 3 December 2020)

These quotations illustrate the extent of difficulties experienced by the OECD in accessing and measuring OOSY. However, the appointed contractor – Educational Testing Service (ETS, based in the United States) – 'has very limited experience with carrying out a household survey, let alone one as challenging as this' (Expert Interview #1 by authors, 2018). Both problems exacerbated the risk of 'performance failures' (Suchman, 1995), which would challenge the OECD's legitimacy. We now examine how the OECD and ETS responded to these challenges by twice changing their definitions of OOSY.

As we noted above, PISA-D initially defined Strand C's target population as 15-year-olds who are not in school (OECD, 2016a). Subsequently, in 2017, the OECD and ETS made two technical adjustments to increase the sample size. First, they broadened the age range of the target population from 15 to 14–16 years of age, stating that decision was recommended in the OECD Education Working Paper no. 120, which was authored by

independent expert Roy Carr-Hill (OECD, 2017); notably, in practice, the PISA sample is based on an age range that extends beyond 15-year-olds (i.e. between 15 years and 3 months to 16 years and 2 months). The second and more significant adjustment was to include those aged 14–16 who are in school but in grade 6 or below (i.e. grade repeaters) in the definition of OOSY. To justify this shift, it was linked to the work of UNICEF and UIS, as the quote below illustrates:

PISA-D's definition of 'out-of-school' builds on the work of UNICEF and UIS that has defined those children and young people who are excluded from education opportunities. Based on this definition, youth aged 14 to 16 are included in the PISA-D out-of-school sample if they have never attended school, have attended but dropped out during primary school, have completed primary school but did not continue to secondary school, entered secondary school but dropped out, or *are currently enrolled in school but are in Grade 6 or below*. (OECD, 2017, p. 1, our emphasis)

Subsequently, when the final report came out in 2020, this definition was again changed to additionally include irregular attenders, and reference was again made to the work of UNICEF and UNESCO, in addition to the CREATE project. As it stated,

The target population of 14–16-year-olds is described in this report in accordance with the categorisation of zones of exclusion used in the work of the CREATE project and UNESCO's and UNICEF's out-of-school initiative. Consequently, the six zones of exclusion considered in PISA-D include 14–16-year-olds who have never enrolled in school, dropped out of school in primary grades, remained at school but are currently in grade 6 or below, dropped out after completing primary school, dropped out in lower secondary school, and *remained at school in grade 7 or above but are not attending regularly*. (OECD, 2020, p. 6, our emphasis)

Sampling frame and damage limitation for PISA-D OOSY

The OECD quietly moved from its initial plan of assessing youth who are not in school to create a sampling frame based on six zones that also included those enrolled in lower grades and those on the margins. These two groups were placed in Zone 3 ('grade 6 or below') and Zone 6 ('fading out') respectively, in addition to the 'never enrolled' (Zone 1), 'primary drop-outs' (Zone 2), 'primary leavers' (Zone 4) and 'secondary leavers' (Zone 5). As such, the OOSY sample consisted of two different populations: 14- to 16-year-olds who are out of school and those who are in school but not in PISA's target grades or not attending regularly. Meanwhile, the OECD sought to minimise any potential damage to its legitimacy by justifying its changes to the definitions of OOSY to make them appear more consistent with prevailing and accepted definitions used by experts in the field. Concerns had been raised at an early stage; for example, Cambodia, as one of the piloting nations, was keen to take part in PISA-D but subsequently questioned the value and veracity of the out-of-school component of PISA-D and withdrew from strand C. The author of the country's Capacity Building Plan questioned whether the OECD definition of OOSY was meaningful for research purposes and relevant to national interests and stated, 'the consensus within the Ministry [...] is that the implementation of Strand C in Cambodia would be too expensive and not have sufficient utility' (Cartwright, 2016, p. 11).

In this regard, Suchman (1995, p. 597) notes that to repair threats to its legitimacy, an organisation ‘must construct a “firewall” between audience assessments of specific past *actions* and audience assessments of general ongoing *essences*’ (original emphasis). In the case of PISA-D, the OECD sought to mesh its tactical changes (to the ways that OOSY were defined, most notably by including those who were in schools and in grade 6 or below) with equally focused normalising accounts. The normalising accounts were provided primarily by portraying the sampled population as consistent with those of established authorities in the field, specifically UNESCO, UNICEF and the CREATE initiative.

However, the PISA-D sampling frame is not compatible with those models. In the OOSCI framework developed by UNICEF and UNESCO, the second group refers to those who are at risk of dropping out due to discriminatory practices or attitudes within the school. It does not provide a basis for including those who remain at school but are currently in grade 6 or below. Moreover, the OOSCI manual notes that not all overage children are at risk of dropping out: ‘In some countries, parents are allowed to decide when to send their children to primary school; holding children back for one year before they enter school can, in some cases, reduce the risk of dropout’ (UNICEF, and UNESCO Institute for Statistics UIS, 2015, p. 46). The reference to CREATE is also problematic, as that model is designed to highlight the precarious access to effective learning held by many subpopulations of young people, nor does it provide a basis for defining and measuring OOSY. Overall, the portrayal of PISA-D sampling as consistent with earlier studies served a normalising function but was based on tenuous links to established authorities.

Nevertheless, by including subgroups who are enrolled in school, the OECD significantly increased their sample size of OOSY. Evidently, they account for almost one-third (i.e. 27% on average) of the total sample in the reported data (OECD, 2020) and these children could be more readily assessed as part of the in-school assessment exercise. In Senegal, in particular, 42% of 14- to 16-year-olds are enrolled below grade 7. By changing the definition of OOSY, the OECD provided data that allowed a minimum level of comparability between the performance of 14–16-year-olds who were ‘out of school’ and those who were in school. This comparison was central for legitimating the role of PISA as the universal measure of SDG 4. For example, the OECD reported that, in reading, less than 2% of 14- to 16-year-old ‘out-of-school youth’ achieved Level 2 (the basic proficiency level indicated by SDG 4.1), compared to the 27.2% of 15-year-olds who took part in the school-based assessment. In mathematics, that percentage is 1.1% versus 12.2%. Despite the binary distinction, the reported data were based on the degree to which a youth was out of school rather than based on their initial, clear definition of OOSY, and this redefinition was introduced late in the process. Notably, public statements about PISA-D continued to only refer to OOSY, rather than to the range of children who they have defined as OOSY.

Discussion

The OECD portrayed PISA-D’s out-of-school assessment as novel and significant. It claimed that through this pioneering development, it had successfully assessed the most disadvantaged youth in poor nations, providing reliable data for monitoring the

attainment of SDG 4.1 and for developing more inclusive education policies. It also claimed that LMICs would be able to identify best practices from each other. This portrayal of the features, procedures and outputs of PISA-D as they relate to the more disadvantaged groups in society has helped to promote the OECD's pragmatic, moral and cognitive legitimacy. Our analysis challenges those claims by focusing on who was assessed and suggests that the inclusion of OOSY has been misrepresented by the OECD. We interpret this approach as an exercise in damage-containment (Suchman, 1995) designed to limit the potential threat to the legitimacy of PISA-D and the OECD as the 'the world's premier yardstick of educational quality'. The change to the definition of OOSY was normalised by (a) presenting it as a micro-level technical adjustment made with reference to prior work on OOSY that has stressed its nonbinary nature and (b), consistently claiming to have only measured OOSY and minimising any reference having made to those adjustments. Limiting the damage to its legitimacy allowed the OECD to avoid addressing the many problems it faced in accessing OOSY, claim it had pioneered the successful measurement of OOSY, legitimate and increase its engagement in monitoring SDG 4, and measure and compare LMICs against PISA.

It is notable that in all the public-facing statements from when PISA-D was both initiated (Schleicher, 2014) and completed (Schleicher, 2020), the claim that PISA-D has taken the innovative step of assessing OOSY was reiterated. That in practice its assessment included many young people in school was only evident in a PISA-D Brief (OECD, 2017), which was a technical document. Thus, for example, the report of the PISA-D results only distinguishes between 'in school' and 'out of school' data (OECD 2020). Given the extensive evidence, both that contained in PISA-D and that in prior studies (UNICEF and UNESCO-UIS, 2012, 2014; Bloem, 2013), that OOSY perform at lower levels than those who are in school, the inclusion of those in school inflates the reported learning outcomes of the OOSY population. That is worrying, as in Guatemala, Paraguay and Senegal, only 1% of OOSY performed at Level 2 or above. Given the far better performance of those in school, it is probable that the 1% who performed at that level were drawn from the in-school students, a situation that highlights the target of measurement and whether it provided useful data.

Our analysis contributes to the literature in three important ways. First, it has attempted to bring some coherence to the existing interpretations of the OECD's legitimacy by focusing on the complex and interacting sources (i.e. pragmatic, moral and cognitive legitimacy) that are derived both from the actions and features of the OECD and from environmental conditions. Drawing on Suchman's comprehensive framework, we conceive of PISA-D as a macro-level strategy to legitimate PISA as the vehicle for accessing LMICs and then demonstrate how at the micro-level challenges to that legitimacy emerged and how the OECD tactically dealt with it by redefining OOSY and using a normalising strategy.

Second, the focus on organisations actively pursuing a range of strategies to promote and repair their legitimacy provides an alternative to recent analyses that position the legitimacy of IOs as being primarily defined by the expectations of others (see, e.g. Edwards et al. 2018). Our analysis suggests that the OECD has made tactical changes to repair potential damage to its reputation and status. Thus, in line with Suchman (1995), the multiplicity of legitimacy dynamics creates considerable latitude for organisational actors to strategically manoeuvre within their cultural environments. Admittedly, there is much debate about the definition of

OOSY in the literature. The point is not that the OECD should refrain from changing its definitions but to argue that this was a tactical move that was fundamentally made as an attempt to solve the problem of not having enough ‘measurable’ OOSY. The problematic aspects include the lack of disclosure of the complexity and flexibility of this measure, its misleading reporting, and the opportunity costs of the entire exercise. While the total costs of engaging in PISA-D are not known, Engel and Rutkowski (2018) estimated that it cost the United States 6.7 million USD in total to participate in PISA 2012. That did not include the testing of OOSY.

Third, by highlighting the misrepresentation of OOSY in the process of data collection and sampling, we provide a critical perspective on the use of the PISA-D out-of-school assessment results. We have shown that the sample of OOSY was inadequate, resulting in less reliable data being used as a basis for extrapolating policy implications and challenging the OECD’s claims that ‘these results truly reveal the full extent of the global learning crisis’ (Schleicher 3 December 2020). Notwithstanding, there are recent studies that have undertaken secondary analyses of PISA-D data to make various policy inferences. For example, based on the OOSY data, Delprato and Frola (2022) claim that policies aimed at linking financial support to attendance, increasing the quality of teaching and tackling discrimination can help boost the progression across the six exclusion zones. These longstanding generic lessons, albeit made with caution, did not originate from the PISA-D data. Similarly, the OECD’s own policy recommendations for the nations which participated in PISA-D were primarily derived from comparisons with high performing nations on PISA (Auld et al., 2020).

Notes

1. These include the operational manual (*Global Out-of-School Children Initiative Operational Manual*) and a joint report (*Fixing the Broken Promise of Education for All: Findings from the Global Initiative on Out-of-School Children*).
2. These include a working paper (*PISA-D Technical Strand C: Incorporating Out-of-School Youth in the Assessment*), a *PISA-D Brief*, and *PISA-D Project Completion Report*.
3. These include 3 presentations given by senior officials (representative of Panama’s Ministry of Education, the Paraguayan National Project Manager and the OECD Director for Education and Skills) and the final report (*PISA-D Out-of-School Assessment Results in Focus*).
4. This includes a small number of children in preprimary education and in nonformal education.
5. Although the OECD refers to the PISA test as for 15-year-olds, it is specifically defined as 15 years 3 months (completed) to 16 years 2 months (completed) (OECD, 2016b).

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