TA Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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The COVID pandemic is not the only reason causing global student learning loss

Teenagers globally only have a few years to improve their maths, language and science skills before they finish their education and start their own professions.

Within the context of the 3-year assessment of the state of educational performance, experts from the OECD agreed that students' general knowledge in critical areas had declined globally, even to "unprecedented" levels.

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) survey showed a general decline in student performance globally, with some exceptions among countries, primarily in Asia and the Pacific.

Since 2000, these tests have been conducted every 3 years at the national level in the OECD region to determine changes in students' ability to solve complex mathematical problems, communicate effectively and think critically.

As a widely accepted instrument for diagnosing the state of national education systems, the PISA tests showed a rather gloomy picture this year.

A general decline in knowledge

It has been a year longer since the previous test in 2018, as it could not be organised in 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, so the results published last Tuesday refer to tests carried out worldwide in 2022.

A global decline was recorded in mathematics as it fell by 15 score points compared to 2018. This is the equivalent of three-quarters of a year of learning. The decline in reading is comparable to falling behind by half a school year. Knowledge levels remained similar to 2018 levels in the science category.

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Numerous governments have searched for a way to justify the decline in student knowledge, primarily using a global negative trend. However, the only countries having reasons to be satisfied are the countries and territories in East Asia: Singapore, Macao, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan and South Korea, which lead the global list.

Fifteen year-old students from Singapore scored higher than the average, so according to the OECD, they are 3 to 5 years ahead of their peers, included in the average.

Some principal industrial nations are concerned about the educational lag of their teenagers, even though some, like the US, are keen to point out how they have improved in ratings despite grades.

The US has improved in mathematics, so it holds 26th place currently (out of 37 OECD countries and 44 partner countries), while in 2018, it was in 29th place. However, this increase was recorded as other countries declined even further.

It is similar in Germany, for example, whose students scored the lowest result since the PISA testing started. Their knowledge has declined in all 3 criteria (mathematics, reading, and science), whereby in the first 2, Germany is below the average in the OECD region. Science is above the global average.

The average results cannot be a consolation for the German education system, given that the global average and standard have also declined.

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England moved up the list of countries compared to the previous survey in 2018, from 17th to 11th place in mathematics. However, this has left a bitter taste because young people's mathematical skills are down by 12 score points compared to 2018.

A shining example among Europeans is, once again, Estonia, which is among the top 8 globally, as the only European country among the Asian education systems at the top of the list.

“Our teachers pay a lot of attention to all children equally in the class, and we achieve the top results in the world not only thanks to the most capable children but with the above-average results of all children. The professional skills of Estonian teachers are a key here”, said Kristina Kallas, Estonian Minister of Education.

The COVID pandemic as an excuse

Most governments have sought an excuse for the general decline in the knowledge of their teenagers in the disruption of the educational process due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, experts only partially agree that COVID was primarily responsible for the poor results.

The lockdown duration disrupted the regularity of classes and, thus, the commitment to learning. However, even though all tested countries had a negative experience with COVID, for some, the disorder did not affect the overall performance of students, which means that the reasons are still elsewhere.

In some countries, poor organisation of online classes influenced the decline in knowledge. The shorter duration of the lockdown, or the faster return of students to the classroom, led to better PISA results and, on the other hand, weaker results where the lockdown lasted longer.

The professional skills of Estonian teachers are a key here - Kristina Kallas, Estonian Minister of Education

However, at the centre of the issue is the social environment and the commitment of teachers to work with students.

In Germany, for example, the lack of linguistic support for some groups of students, primarily migrants, whose weaker language skills affect their overall performance in classes, has been recognised as one of the factors in the decline in educational ratings.

On the other hand, the success of Far Eastern educational systems is attributed partly to cultural tradition, which develops a feeling of non-acceptance and even fear of failure in children, which motivates them to work harder.

However, they are running behind in more relaxed extracurricular activities, such as sports, because a clear correlation has been established between high-ranking countries and the lower participation of their students in extracurricular and non-compulsory activities.

States, particularly in the West, will undoubtedly have to invest more in their educational systems, given the continuing trend of their struggling behind Asian education systems, which will be reflected in their economic performance in the short term.

New investments have to be allocated towards maximising human potential, particularly educators.

The most significant factor for that positive shift is "the level of support pupils received

from teachers and school staff", said Irene Hu, an OECD analyst.