

[Pisa or Babel?](#) [1]

Written by [Philip Salter](#) [2] | Wednesday 15 December 2010



Peter Wilby writes a broadly convincing [argument in TES](#) [3] against taking the [Pisa results](#) [4] too seriously. As the former editor of the *New Statesman* suggests, comparisons can be misleading. A few potential sampling errors are pointed to, some more convincing than others, but whatever the merit of each, overall his thesis is persuasive. For anyone familiar with the fallibilities of the sciences, none of this should come as too much of a surprise.

Mr Wilby is hoist by his own petard, though. After much sound reasoning he ends by using the Pisa results to attack the US and neoliberalism. Quite why he does this after everything written before is surprising to say the least. I think as a rule one should try not to contradict oneself in the same article, while contradictions between articles should always be forgiven. After all, people have been known to change their minds.

Yet Mr Wilby's point stands. With headlines and policy cobbled together from some tentative results, it would have been much better if these tests had not received so much attention, or perhaps not taken place at all. Like so much public policy, education has lurched from one failed silver bullet to the next. Today it is teachers' qualifications, while yesterday it was class sizes. The behemoth of the state is tying itself in a knot, leaving no room for innovation. That governments still have such a uniform model of education within its borders is a sign of how stilted things are ? Pisa is a sign of how far we have to go.

Rather than rely on the tentative, much better to build upon surer ground. There can be no doubting that the private sector does stuff better and cheaper than government run and regulated stuff ? therefore, in education we should keep government to an absolute minimum, only interfering when we can be as certain as we can be that we are not making things worse.

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