

RESPONSE TO POINTS RAISED IN HEINZ-DIETER MEYER 'OPEN LETTER'

Their concerns

MEYER: "PISA... has caused a shift of attention to short-term fixes designed to help a country quickly climb the rankings, despite research showing that enduring changes in education practice take decades, not a few years to come to fruition."

There is nothing that suggests that PISA, or other educational comparisons, have caused a 'shift to short-term fixes' in education policy. On the contrary, by opening up a perspectives to a wider range of policy options that arise from international comparisons, PISA has provided many opportunities for more strategic policy design. It has also created important opportunities for policy-makers and other stakeholders to collaborate across borders. The annual International Summit of the Teaching Profession, where ministers meet with union leaders to discuss ways to raise the status of the teaching profession, is an example. Not least, while it is undoubtedly true that some reforms take time to bear fruit, a number of countries have in fact shown that rapid progress can be made in the short term e.g. Poland, Germany and others making observable steady progress every three years.

MEYER: "by emphasizing a narrow range of measurable aspects of education, PISA takes attention away from the less measurable or immeasurable educational objectives"

Mr. Meyer does not seem to be aware of the full range of reporting of PISA. PISA assesses an unprecedented range of learning outcomes and their contexts, including student performance measures, measures of social and emotional dimensions, student attitudes and motivations, equity issues, and parental support. Member countries review the measurement domains ever three years and extend the breadth of the measures covered continually.

MEYER: "unlike United Nations (UN) organizations such as UNESCO or UNICEF that have clear and legitimate mandates to improve education and the lives of children around the world, OECD has no such mandate. Nor are there, at present, mechanisms of effective democratic participation in its education decision-making process"

OECD's mandate is provided by the member countries of the OECD, much the same as in UNESCO and UNICEF. Decision-making in PISA (and in all OECD activities) is carried out by member countries. In PISA, the decision-making body is the PISA Governing Board which has representatives from all member countries.

MEYER: “to carry out PISA and a host of follow-up services, OECD has embraced “public-private partnerships” and entered into alliances with multi-national for-profit companies, which stand to gain financially from any deficits—real or perceived—unearthed by PISA. Some of these companies provide educational services to American schools and school districts on a massive, for-profit basis, while also pursuing plans to develop for-profit elementary education in Africa, where OECD is now planning to introduce the PISA program;”

There are no ‘public-private partnerships’ or other ‘alliances’ in PISA of the type Mr. Meyer implies. All work relating to the development, implementation and reporting of PISA is carried out under the sole responsibility of the OECD, under the guidance of the PISA Governing Board. The OECD does, of course, contract specific technical services out to individuals, institutions or companies. Where it does, these individuals, institutions or companies are appointed by the OECD following an open, transparent and public call for tender. This transparent and open process ensures that each task is carried out by those entities that demonstrate they are best qualified and provide the best value for money. No individual academic, institution or company gains any advantage from this since the results of all PISA-related work are placed in the public domain.

MEYER: “...PISA , with its continuous cycle of global testing, harms our children and impoverishes our classrooms, as it inevitably involves more and longer batteries of multiple-choice testing...”

Mr. Meyer does not seem aware that PISA is only administered to a small fraction of students and that only around a third of the PISA items are in multiple-choice format. Moreover, the length of the PISA tests has not increased since the first survey in 2000. Measurement is based on a sample of schools and a sample of 15-year-olds within each school; no student would ever be involved in successive surveys. The claim that a two-hour test could ‘endanger the well-being’ of students and teachers is thus unfounded.

MEYER: “...no reform of any consequence should ignore the important role of non-educational factors, among which a nation’s socio-economic inequality is paramount. In many countries, including the United States, inequality has dramatically increased over the past 15 years, explaining the widening educational gap between rich and poor which education reforms, no matter how sophisticated, are unlikely to redress;”

Rather than taking an ideological stance like Mr. Meyer, who seems to imply that social inequalities are immutable to policy intervention, the PISA reports devote considerable detail to analysing the links between social inequality in the student population and learning outcomes empirically. These analyses show that poverty is not destiny and that the impact which social background has on learning outcomes varies very significantly across countries and policy contexts. Germany provides an example where social inequalities have risen between 2003 and 2012 while the impact which social background has on learning outcomes has significantly declined over the same period, to no small part in the wake of educational reforms introduced in light of results from PISA 2000.

MEYER: “...develop alternatives to league tables: explore more meaningful and less easily sensationalized ways of reporting assessment outcomes. For example, comparing developing countries, where 15-year olds are regularly drafted into child labor, with first world countries makes neither educational nor political sense and opens OECD up for charges of educational colonialism”

Less than 1% of the PISA reporting is devoted to league tables. The view of the OECD is that it should be up to individual countries to decide to what extent they wish to be compared internationally and it rejects the rather patronising view of Mr. Meyer that ‘developing countries’ should be excluded from such comparisons. Indeed, one of the major findings from PISA is that the world is no longer divided

between rich and well-educated countries, and poor and badly educated ones, as Mr. Meyer's suggestions imply.