

An Open Letter: To Andreas Schleicher, OECD, Paris

Heinz-Dieter Meyer und Katie Zahedi

Der im Folgenden abgedruckte offene Brief erschien am 6. 5. 2014 parallel im Online Journal „Global Policy“ und auf der Internetseite von „The Guardian“¹, er wurde von etwa 120 Erstunterzeichner/innen aus 12 Staaten mitgezeichnet, darunter auch einige Mitglieder der GDM. Im Sinne der vollständigen Offenlegung: Auch ich habe diesen Brief mitunterzeichnet.

Zwischenzeitlich ist (ohne explizite Angabe einer Autorenschaft) auf den Internetseiten der OECD die im Anschluss an den Brief abgedruckte Reaktion erschie-

nen.² Auf den Seiten der Gesellschaft für Bildung und Wissen finden Sie auch eine deutschsprachige Übersetzung des offenen Briefs.³

Heinz-Dieter Meyer als einem der Autoren des Briefes wurde zudem die Möglichkeit einer Rückantwort gegeben, diese ist im Anschluss an die Antwort der OECD abgedruckt. Da nicht alle Texte in deutscher Sprache verfügbar sind, werden sie hier einheitlich im englischsprachigen Original wiedergegeben.

Andreas Vohms

¹ Vgl. <http://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/blog/05/05/2014/open-letter-andreas-schleicher-oecd-paris> bzw. <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/may/06/oecd-pisa-tests-damaging-education-academics>

² Vgl. <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/aboutpisa/OECD-response-to-Heinz-Dieter-Meyer-Open-Letter.pdf>

³ Vgl. <http://bildung-wissen.eu/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/offener-brief-schleicher-autorisierte-fassung.pdf>

Dear Dr. Schleicher,

We write to you in your capacity as OECD's director of the Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA). Now in its 13th year, PISA is known around the world as an instrument to rank OECD and non-OECD countries (60+ at last count) according to a measure of academic achievement of 15 year old students in mathematics, science, and reading. Administered every three years, PISA results are anxiously awaited by governments, education ministers, and the editorial boards of newspapers, and are cited authoritatively in countless policy reports. They have begun to deeply influence educational practices in many countries. As a result of PISA, countries are overhauling their education systems in the hopes of improving their rankings. Lack of progress on PISA has led to declarations of crisis and "PISA shock" in many countries, followed by calls for resignations, and far-reaching reforms according to PISA precepts.

We are frankly concerned about the negative consequences of the PISA rankings. These are some of our concerns:

- while standardized testing has been used in many nations for decades (despite serious reservations about its validity and reliability), PISA has contributed to an escalation in such testing and a dramatically increased reliance on quantitative measures. For example, in the United States, PISA has been invoked as a major justification for the recent "Race to the Top" program, which has increased the use of standardized testing for student-, teacher-, and administrator evaluations, which rank and label students, as well as teachers and administrators according to the results of tests widely known to be imperfect (see, for example, Finland's unexplained decline from the top of the PISA table);
- in education policy, PISA, with its three-year assessment cycle, 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. For example, we know that the status of teachers and the prestige of teaching as a profession has a strong influence on the quality of instruction, but that status varies strongly across cultures and is not easily influenced by short-term policy;
- by emphasizing a narrow range of measurable aspects of education, PISA takes attention away from the less measurable or immeasurable educational objectives like physical, moral, civic, and artistic development, thereby dangerously

narrowing our collective imagination regarding what education is and ought to be about;

- as an organization of economic development, OECD is naturally biased in favor of the economic role of public schools. But preparing young men and women for gainful employment is not the only, and not even the main goal of public education, which has to prepare students for participation in democratic self-government, moral action, and a life of personal development, growth, and well-being;
- 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;
- 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;
- finally, and most importantly: the new PISA regime, 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, more scripted "vendor"-made lessons, and less autonomy for our teachers. In this way PISA has further increased the already high stress-level in our schools, which endangers the well-being of our students and teachers.

These developments are in overt conflict with widely accepted principles of good educational and democratic practice:

- no reform of any consequence should be based on a single narrow measure of quality;
- 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;
- an organization like OECD, as any organization that deeply affects the life of our communities,

should be open to democratic accountability by members of those communities.

We are writing not only to point out deficits and problems. We would also like to offer constructive ideas and suggestions that may help to alleviate the above mentioned concerns. While in no way complete, they illustrate how learning could be improved without the above mentioned negative effects:

- 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;
- make room for participation by the full range of relevant constituents and scholarship: to date, the groups with greatest influence on what and how international learning is assessed are psychometricians, statisticians, and economists. They certainly deserve a seat at the table, but so do many other groups: parents, educators, administrators, community leaders, students, as well as scholars from disciplines like anthropology, sociology, history, philosophy, linguistics, as well as the arts and humanities. What and how we assess the education of 15 year old students should be subject to discussions involving all these groups at local, national, and international levels;
- include national and international organizations in the formulation of assessment methods and standards whose mission goes beyond the economic aspect of public education and which are concerned with the health, human development, well-being and happiness of students and teachers. This would include the above mentioned United Nations organizations, as well as teacher, parent, and administrator associations, to name a few;
- publish the direct and indirect costs of administering PISA so that taxpayers in member countries can gauge alternative uses of the millions of dollars spent on these tests and determine if they want to continue their participation in it;
- welcome oversight by independent international monitoring teams which can observe the administration of PISA from the conception to the execution, so that questions about test format and statistical and scoring procedures can be weighed fairly against charges of bias or unfair comparisons;
- provide detailed accounts regarding the role of private, for-profit companies in the preparation,

execution, and follow-up to the tri-annual PISA assessments to avoid the appearance or reality of conflicts of interest;

- slow down the testing juggernaut. To gain time to discuss the issues mentioned here at local, national, and international levels, consider skipping the next PISA cycle. This would give time to incorporate the collective learning that will result from the suggested deliberations in a new and improved assessment model.

We assume that OECD's PISA experts are motivated by a sincere desire to improve education. But we fail to understand how your organization has become the global arbiter of the means and ends of education around the world. OECD's narrow focus on standardized testing risks turning learning into drudgery and killing the joy of learning. As PISA has led many governments into an international competition for higher test scores, OECD has assumed the power to shape education policy around the world, with no debate about the necessity or limitations of OECD's goals. We are deeply concerned that measuring a great diversity of educational traditions and cultures using a single, narrow, biased yardstick could, in the end, do irreparable harm to our schools and our students.

Sincerely,

Heinz-Dieter Meyer, State University of New York (SUNY Albany)

Katie Zahedi, Principal, Red Hook, New York

Response to points raised in Heinz-Dieter Meyer 'Open Letter' (OECD)

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 every 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 multinational 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.

Rejoinder (Heinz-Dieter Meyer)

I am happy with the results of the letter so far. The letter has been widely reported in the international press and, to date, been supported by more than 3000 signatories from more than a dozen different countries. The signatories include leaders of teacher associations as well as hundreds of widely recognized experts in the field of education research and policy. It has been translated into five different languages, with more translations forthcoming.

The letter expresses concern that a single test, measuring a narrow aspect of public education, is used worldwide to create an atmosphere of "crisis" and urgency for action, justifying reforms that are narrowly based on improving the economic fitness of public education, often invasive and calculated to produce short-term gains in the PISA rankings.

In his reply, Dr. Schleicher disputed the claim that PISA encourages a short-term focus on quick fixes to the detriment of gradual improvements over the long haul. For evidence he pointed to gains achieved by countries like Germany which improved from 2006 to 2012 by an average of 10 points on the PISA scale. He did not mention that in the same six year span three-time PISA leader Finland lost 22 points!

Nor did he engage our claim that cultural and historical factors play a nearly all-decisive role rendering between-country comparisons almost meaningless. For example, it has been largely overlooked that all leading PISA countries are Confucian exam system countries. At the point when PISA tests the 15-year-olds in countries like

Korea, Japan, China, Singapore, these students are already gearing up for an 'all or nothing' end-of-high school exam that will, once and for all, determine their future chances. While this practice is quite conducive to stir students into artificially inflated performances through cramming, it is demonstrably not conducive to the optimal development of a nation's talent and is coming increasingly under criticism in these countries themselves.

Test Irregularities and Data Intransparency

One of the most contested aspects of PISA has been Shanghai's role in the test. Not only did the OECD allow China to selectively participate in PISA through a district known not to be representative for the country's education system as a whole. OECD also allowed Shanghai schools to exclude the children of migrant workers. By allowing China to participate in PISA on such special terms, the OECD knowingly condoned and contributed to generating artificially inflated outcomes which it then went on to use as proof that Chinese students were "three years ahead" of countries nearer the OECD average.

Private Contractor and Conflict-of-Interest Transparency

To date, OECD has relied extensively on private contractors like Pearson Ltd to carry out the extensive data collection involved with PISA. Given the volume and extent of these assignments, these for-profit-companies stand to sustain significant financial gains from their role in PISA. One of these companies is Pearson Ltd, which OECD has repeatedly used to develop, conduct, or evaluate PISA tests and which a few weeks ago again received the contract to develop the PISA 2015 testing framework.

At the same time, however, Pearson plays a major role in the delivery of testing, test-assessment and instructional improvement services in PISA nations like the United States where the company, according to its own reports, administered 50 million online or paper tests in 2013 from which a large portion of its 500 million profit portfolio derived. Many of these services are officially justified with the need to improve the country's PISA performance.

In other words: Pearson designs and evaluates PISA while also (at least in the case of the US) designing and implementing the instructional and testing services meant to improve the performance it previously diagnosed as insufficient – in both cases earning millions in profit!

Our concerns about conflict-of-interest violations are further heightened by the fact that Dr. Schleicher serves on Pearson's Advisory Board.

We thus repeat our call that OECD make available in easily accessible form all relevant information regarding the private companies that OECD uses in carrying out PISA's tests (including calls for tenders and information on the subsequent bidding and selection process).

This would also include the reporting of instances where OECD officials have official functions in said private companies (and vice versa). Dr. Schleicher's membership on the Pearson Advisory Board would constitute a case in point.

Independent Monitoring and Oversight

The above problems suggest to us that, at present, PISA lacks proper independent oversight. We call

for the establishment of a commission of representatives of the international education community, made up of individuals from the United Nations and its affiliate organizations, as well as from organizations of teachers, researchers, and administrators. Members of such an independent body should have access to PISA data at any of its stages as well as monitor test design and implementation.

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