

Education International
Guide to PISA 2006



Education International
Internationale de l'Éducation
Internacional de la Educación
Bildungsinternationale

PISA 2006 participating countries^a

	<u>Argentina</u> *		<u>Australia</u>		<u>Austria</u>
	<u>Azerbaijan</u> *		<u>Belgium</u>		<u>Brazil</u> *
	<u>Bulgaria</u> *		<u>Canada</u>		<u>Chile</u> *
	<u>Colombia</u> *		<u>Croatia</u> *		<u>Czech Republic</u>
	<u>Denmark</u>		<u>Estonia</u> *		<u>Finland</u>
	<u>France</u>		<u>Germany</u>		<u>Greece</u>
	<u>Hong Kong-China</u> *		<u>Hungary</u>		<u>Iceland</u>
	<u>Indonesia</u> *		<u>Ireland</u>		<u>Israel</u> *
	<u>Italy</u>		<u>Japan</u>		<u>Jordan</u> *
	<u>Korea</u>		<u>Kyrgyz Republic</u> *		<u>Latvia</u> *
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	<u>New Zealand</u>		<u>Norway</u>		<u>Poland</u>
	<u>Portugal</u>		<u>Qatar</u> *		<u>Republic of Montenegro</u> *
	<u>Republic of Serbia</u> *		<u>Romania</u> *		<u>Russian Federation</u> *
	<u>Slovak Republic</u>		<u>Slovenia</u> *		<u>Spain</u>
	<u>Sweden</u>		<u>Switzerland</u>		<u>Chinese Taipei</u> *
	<u>Thailand</u> *		<u>Tunisia</u> *		<u>Turkey</u>
	<u>United Kingdom</u>		<u>United States</u>		<u>Uruguay</u> *

* signifies partner countries

^a Please see www.pisa-oecd.org

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Foreword

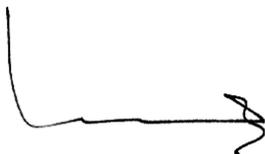
When PISA released its last major report three years ago it made front page news in many countries. We can expect the same when the PISA 2006 report is released worldwide on 4 December this year.

Education International welcomes comparative international research in education. OECD has been at the forefront of that research, and PISA is the most prominent example – involving not only the 30 OECD member countries but also 27 other countries in the latest cycle. The great merit of PISA has been that it has highlighted both quality and equity issues. It has stimulated debate in which education unions have been active participants.

At the same time, PISA has often been misused. PISA is about more than ranking the performance of countries and systems, but that is often how it has been reported. And we can rightly ask the question: has PISA just become a media phenomenon? After all, PISA is based on a relatively simple set of questions, answered by a sample of students drawn from one particular age-group – 15 year-olds. It does not and cannot portray anything like the total picture of education in any country. Education unions must warn the public – and policy-makers in the ministries – of the danger of over simplifying, of paying attention only to the headlines.

This EI Guide to PISA has been produced by our Research Unit to provide member unions with basic information about PISA, so as to help unions prepare their responses and comments for the media and policy-makers, when PISA 2006 is released on 4 December. It then poses a number of questions about the political use of PISA – the use or misuse of PISA by politicians and the media.

EI's work on PISA is undertaken in cooperation with our partner the Trade Union Advisory Committee at OECD – TUAC. This is work in progress, as the debate about the use of research in the development of educational policies will have a continuing impact on the advocacy of EI member unions around the world.



Fred van Leeuwen
General Secretary

Section I – PISA Facts

1. What is PISA?

1. The OECD **Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)** is an internationally standardised test undertaken by random samples of 15-year-olds in schools. It is developed by the OECD and participating countries – all 30 OECD member countries, and a growing number of “partner countries” – 27 in 2006, making a total of 57. PISA is the best known international comparative study undertaken regularly in education today. Its results have a significant impact on education policy in participating countries and beyond. Its popularity is expanding with both governments and mass media. The general public wants to understand “what’s going on in education”, and governments want to demonstrate “progress in education” to their electorates. PISA represents an attractive instrument for both groups. It is a great news item for media, who play the critical role of mediating the debate on the study results between the two above mentioned groups.

2. PISA is an exceptional study, but it is by no means a unique phenomenon. It is, rather, an example of the current trend of “evidence-based research”, which plays a central role in policy debates at OECD and in many countries.

3. The survey was implemented in 43 countries in the first cycle (2000), in 41 countries in the second cycle (2003) and 57 countries (or education systems) participated in the third cycle (2006). The PISA home page is www.pisa.oecd.org. In order to see all the 57 countries, you can access directly the following link:

http://www.pisa.oecd.org/document/13/0,2340,en_32252351_32236225_3366_6189_1_1_1_1,00.html, then click on a particular country of your choice in order to see the contact, the reports and all other information related to PISA 2006 in this country.

4,500 to 10,000 students per country typically undergo the tests.

4. The report of PISA 2006 will be published on the 4th of December 2007 and can be expected to attract widespread media attention.

2. Who runs PISA?

5. Four groups are involved in the day-to-day running of PISA:

6. **The PISA Governing Board**, on which each participating country is represented, determines, in the context of the OECD objectives, the policy priorities for OECD/PISA, and oversees the adherence to these priorities during the implementation of the programme.

http://www.pisa.oecd.org/document/53/0,2340,en_32252351_32236359_3361_4005_1_1_1_1,00.html (Follow the link to see all the Board members with their contact details)

7. Through the **National Project Managers**, participating countries implement PISA at the national level, in accordance with the agreed administration procedures. National Project Managers play a vital role in ensuring the correct implementation of the tests, and verify and evaluate the survey results, analyses, reports and publications.

http://www.pisa.oecd.org/document/61/0,2340,en_32252351_32236359_3366_1693_1_1_1_1,00.html (Follow the link to see all the National co-ordinators and their contact details)

8. The **OECD Secretariat** has the overall managerial responsibility for the programme: it monitors its implementation on a day-to-day basis, acts as the secretariat for the PISA Governing Board, builds consensus among countries, and serves as the interlocutor between the PISA Governing Board and the international consortium charged with the implementation

of the activities. Andreas Schleicher, Head of the *Indicators and Analysis Division* in the Education Directorate, is the principal contact point for PISA.

9. An **international consortium** is responsible for the design and implementation of the PISA surveys. The consortium consists of the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), CITO Groep (Netherlands), the Educational Testing Service (ETS) (USA), the National Institute for Educational Research (NIER) (Japan), and WESTAT (USA). Questions to the consortium should first be addressed to the OECD Secretariat.

3. What does PISA assess?

10. PISA assesses how far students, who are near the end of compulsory education (15 year-olds), have acquired the knowledge and skills that are essential for their full participation in society. In all cycles, the domains of reading, mathematical and scientific literacy are covered, not merely in terms of mastery of the school curriculum, but also in terms of important knowledge and skills needed in adult life. In the PISA 2003 cycle, an additional domain of problem solving was introduced to continue the examination of cross-curriculum competencies.

11. Pencil-and-paper tests are used, with assessments lasting a total of two hours for each student.

Test items are a mixture of multiple-choice items and questions requiring students to construct their own responses. The items are organised in groups based on a passage setting out a real-life situation.

A total of about seven hours of test items is covered, with different students taking different combinations of test items.

12. In addition to Test items, students answer a background questionnaire, which takes 20-30 minutes to complete, requiring them to provide information about themselves and their homes. School principals are given a 20-minute questionnaire about their schools. A parents' questionnaire and an ICT familiarity questionnaire are international options. Parents' questionnaire data might be used in analyzing students' engagement with their studies. In the context of science learning, ICT questionnaire data, which will be now available for three cycles, may be used to describe trends in computer use and familiarity.

4. PISA cycles

13. The assessment takes place in cycles of three years.

14. Each cycle is named after the year in which the assessment takes place. The first two cycles, PISA 2000 and PISA 2003, have been completed. The PISA 2006 cycle will be completed with the release of the report on 4 December 2007, while future assessments are planned for 2009 and beyond.

15. In all PISA cycles, the domains of reading, mathematical and science literacy are assessed. However, each of the cycles has a particular focus on one single domain. The main focus of PISA 2000 was on reading literacy, in the sense that it included an extensive set of tasks in this field. In PISA 2003, the emphasis was on mathematical literacy, and an additional sphere on problem solving was introduced. For the PISA 2006 cycle, the focus was on scientific literacy. The PISA governing body is currently looking into the possibility of expanding PISA to other age-groups and levels of education.

5. What is the 2006 cycle about?

5.1 How does OECD/PISA understand "scientific literacy"?

16. "Scientific literacy is the capacity to use scientific knowledge, to identify questions and to draw evidence-based conclusions in order to understand and help make decisions about the natural world and the changes made to it through human activity." (OECD, 2006)

For a full description of PISA interpretation of scientific literacy, see Chapter 3 of the publication "PISA 2003 Assessment Framework - Mathematics, Reading, Science and Problem Solving Knowledge and Skills"

http://www.pisa.oecd.org/pages/0,2966,en_32252351_32236102_1_1_1_1_1_0_0.html (For download, follow the link and choose if you want the full publication or read the chapter only)

17. This definition of scientific literacy reflects the broader OECD understanding and interpretation of literacy as key competences for an individual's life. The PISA survey seeks to measure these competences through specifically designed student tests, and to identify factors behind students' performance – such as their engagement with science at school and at home - including their broader views on science – its usefulness and importance in life.

5.2 How does PISA understand "student performance" in science?

18. PISA 2006 aims to find out what students can do in three areas of science (life systems, physical systems, Earth and Space systems), specifically looking for:

- Student performance in identifying scientific issues
- Student performance in explaining natural phenomena scientifically
- Student performance in using scientific evidence for problem solving
- Overall performance in science learning

The task of the survey is to compare relative strengths and weaknesses of countries in different areas of science learning, and to create a summary picture of science performance in participating countries.

5.3 How does PISA understand "student engagement" in science?

19. PISA 2006 aims to measure students' interest in science and to seek evidence for this interest within science learning, specifically looking for:

- To what extent are students interested in learning scientific topics and do these topics support their scientific inquiry?
- To what extent do students believe they can succeed in science?
- To what extent do students value science? (generally, personally and comparatively with other activities)
- To what extent are students interested in science and why?
- How much time do students spend on science-related activities?
- What are students' perceptions and attitudes regarding environmental issues?

20. The report of the survey will then make an analysis of the relationships or possible correlations between these different types of engagement and those variables associated with students' socio-economic background. For example, correlations would be made between performance (competence) in some domains, engagement levels as evidenced by specific attitudes, beliefs/motivations and students' socio-economic background, gender, origin, and variation in levels both between-schools and within-schools, etc.

5.4 Further, the PISA 2006 report will suggest implications for policy.

21. OECD maintains that PISA does not seek to establish causal links, since cross-sectional data do not allow this. OECD states that the way PISA generally analyses the data is by looking at systems that do well and trying to understand to what extent these systems share

certain common features. Whether and how such features are causally linked to the outcome variables is something that would require true longitudinal studies. However, EI remains concerned that the interpretation given to PISA report often implies such causality links between other variables and student performance. In previous PISA reports, results have mainly been reported by describing the mean performance of students. This has suggested that student competences alone are predictors of performance without establishing causality. It was not possible to explain why some groups of students performed well or badly on a particular task except by reference to individual competence. An alternative to this would be to report in detail the descriptive statistics for all scales (means, standard deviation and percentiles across countries, possibly also by gender) and to describe their relationships with performance, gender and social background. Specific analysis could be used to depict the relationships between these variables (i.e. to what extent certain variables affect the different groups).

This becomes more and more possible at each PISA cycle as data is gathered on a longitudinal basis.

22. This ambition of PISA to make causal conclusions explains the increasing importance of the context data in the 2006 cycle and beyond. In view of the substantial variation regarding how science is taught, organised, and learned across participating countries, it was suggested that a description of the contexts for science learning should be included. It was also proposed to make use of the grade-based sample data, in addition to the age-based approach used in previous assessments (students at the age of 15). The learning context may vary substantially across grades (in particular between lower and upper secondary programmes); therefore, grade-based data may provide a clearer picture.

23. The importance of educational policies and systems for science learning aims at providing substantial data by asking such questions as:-

How is science learning organised? (which are science courses and what is the instructional time for them across countries?)

How is science taught at school? (what are the scientific teaching methods used: interactive; hands-on activities; student investigations; models and applications?)

How well are schools prepared to teach science? (Are there science teachers and appropriate facilities available? are there activities to promote science learning? are there activities to promote the learning of environmental topics?)

How well are students prepared for taking up science-related careers?

These data will be gleaned from responses to students' and principals' questionnaires. There is no Teachers' Questionnaire in PISA, although the OECD had been proposing an "experimental link" between PISA 2006 and the OECD 'Survey of Teachers, Teaching and Learning'. Few countries, however, have adopted this option.

24. Finally, PISA 2006 will cover all background data as in the previous assessments:

- Gender differences in student performance since 2000:

- Gender and Reading Literacy
- Gender and Mathematics Literacy
- Gender and Science Literacy

- Student background and student performance in reading, mathematics and science:

- Parental education
- Parental occupational status
- Family Wealth
- Books at home
- Cultural Possessions
- Home educational resources
- Language
- Immigrant background

- School factors and student performance in reading, mathematics and science:

- Between- and within-school variance
- School policies and practices
- Study programmes
- School management (private/public, autonomy)
- Quality of school resources

25. In the current PISA cycle, it will be possible to report performance not only for science in 2006, but both across cycles (2000, 2003) and domains (Mathematics, Reading, Science).

Section II – The Political Use of PISA

Introduction

26. Based on conclusions from EI/TUAC/OECD consultancy seminar on PISA in September 2006, EI's Research Network agreed in spring 2007 that EI should undertake a study on the political use of PISA and its implications for unions. EI sent a questionnaire to member organisations asking about the effects of PISA in their particular context, and to which extent politicians had used PISA results to advocate for changes and/or to support existing policies. EI also asked unions which initiatives they had taken to come forward with their interpretations and views on PISA.

27. Besides the questionnaire, EI also subscribed to an online media monitoring agent, *Meltwater News*, which daily monitors thousands of online sources globally. This has enabled us to create an extensive database containing articles about PISA.

Report (by Ditte Søbros, EI Research Assistant)^b

28. Almost 10 years ago - in 1998 - Education International (EI) sent a circular to its member organisations regarding the launch of the Programme for International Student Assessment, PISA, welcoming this OECD initiative to undertake a study of student performance. However, EI alerted that such study could be used politically, warning therefore unions to remain vigilant. EI also invited affiliates to participate in the study, and to provide EI with information on initiatives they had taken to avoid such political use of the indicators on student performance¹. Since EI wrote this first circular, the political ground has changed, and during the intervening period we have acquired new insights. Yet, EI's predictions on the risks of political use of PISA have proven to be very accurate.

29. Around the world, we have seen significant changes in the way policies are shaped and in political decision-making processes. One of these changes is a strong emphasis, by governments, on *evidence-based* policy and practice. Along with other trends, such as globalisation, this has stimulated a focus on comparative research as a tool for improving efficiency and effectiveness. Governments want evidence to tell them "what works". Providers of such evidence, including the OECD, have therefore come to play an indirect, yet quite substantial, role in policy-making. Precisely, as PISA sets out to tell policy-makers what works, and because it is used as an input in the policy-process, the study almost inevitably becomes political.

30. Unions are increasingly concerned about this political use of PISA, and the implications such use carries for education and the way we perceive education. First, when media and politicians contextualise and interpret the results from PISA, they often tend to focus only on the rankings, without actually analysing them. Second, in relation to this, quality education has to a greater or lesser extent become a "calculable" item, subject to countless ratings, so that discussions about quality have been reduced to a question of ranking high in PISA reports. As a result, many governments have implemented reforms in the education sector with the stated objective of ranking higher. EI believes that such superficial objectives are threatening the quality of and access to education.

31. However, EI recognises that PISA has also brought valuable and important insights into a broad range of educational issues, for unions as well as for governments. Furthermore, PISA has generated attention about education, raising in a new way a general awareness of the importance of quality education. Yet, although PISA has initiated important discussions on objectives and on quality of education, EI is concerned with the way PISA has created new, sometimes more difficult, conditions for unions when they attempt to participate in public

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discussions on educational policy. PISA has framed debates on education in a way that can make it more difficult for unions, especially when they put forward interpretations of the PISA results which differ from the ones presented by the media and politicians.

What can unions do?

32. During the third Annual EI Research Network meeting in Brussels, 18-19 April 2007, it was agreed that EI should undertake a new study, nine years after the first PISA study, on the political use of PISA, focusing on what unions have done to make their views and interpretations of PISA visible and apparent.

Scope of the report

33. The aim of the report is to provide unions with a better understanding of the mechanisms behind PISA and its use by media and politicians, in order for unions to be better prepared to the release of PISA 2006 in December 2007.

34. First, on a more theoretical level, EI aims at offering a picture of the conditions underlying the current educational policy formation in a new political landscape where traditional ideologies play a less prominent role, allowing other actors such as the OECD to exert a stronger influence on national policy-making. In the first part, the report discusses these changes in the policy-making processes. This leads to a section on the role of international organisations and, more specifically, of OECD in educational policy-making. This is followed by a discussion on PISA – why and how PISA has been used politically.

35. Second, the paper suggests some practical instruments to help unions to manoeuvre in this new political landscape. During the summer of 2007, EI conducted a survey among member organisations, asking how PISA had been used politically in their national contexts and what unions themselves had done in order to challenge this political use of PISA. In the second part, the paper brings examples of how unions' political opportunities have changed, and what unions themselves have done to match these changes.

36. Finally, in the last part the report gives some recommendations to unions, with the aim of helping each union to remain a strong and significant voice in current and future debates on educational policy.

1. Setting the Stage: New Context of Educational Policy Making

37. Around the world, we have seen changes in the way policies are shaped and in political decision-making processes. One of the most significant changes is the role of "evidence-based" policy making. David Blunkett, former British Minister of Education from the Labour Party, argued, in 2000, that:

"Social science should be at the heart of policy-making. We need a revolution in relations between government and the social research community – we need social scientists to help determine what works and why, and what types of policy initiatives are likely to be most effective."²

38. This interest in evidence-based policy can be seen as a post-ideological approach to governance, where 'evidence' increasingly takes a central and explicit role in decision-making, and where pragmatism to a certain extent substitutes for ideology³. As a result, governments combine different policies according to what the evidence advises them to do, and this has blurred the distinction between left and right wing policies.

39. Evidence is not only provided by academic researchers, but also through peer-learning, peer reviews, information sharing and policy transfer between governments. This has led some to argue that today's policy-making is increasingly formed by a "what works" paradigm⁴. This does not mean that ideologies and politics no longer play a role in policy-making for to decide what is "evidence", is clearly a political choice.

What matters is what works

40. One of the assumptions behind the evidence agenda is that policy initiatives supported by research will be more “effective”. A factor defining “what works” is therefore also *effectiveness*, which today has become a main concern for governments⁵. However, the notion of effectiveness is often subjective, for once again, deciding what is considered to be effective is a highly political choice.

41. Some academics, liberals and labour governments and politicians argue that a number of States have now reached a taxation level where higher taxation, broadly speaking, is no longer considered as an option. Hence, governments are now required to get more value for the same money; if they want to improve their provision of public services, such as education, their only option is therefore to be more effective. Governments need evidence to tell them how to be more effective. This has spurred a certain culture of performance, where governments, through accountability, indicators and standardized measurement, try to understand “what works”.

42. At the same time, globalisation has created more demanding labour markets and prompted fierce competition on price and effectiveness. This economic competition has also directed attention to the political level, so that states now also “compete” on policies: Who has the most “efficient” policy? Which policy will yield the best returns?” This has made governments more attentive to the use of policy instruments, such as benchmarks and performance indicators.

43. Furthermore, during the last decades, we have witnessed a series of reforms in public sectors, where governments have implemented New Public Management (NPM) concepts⁶. Being characterised by performance measurement and accountability, NPM has also stimulated a demand for ‘evidence’ to guide the policy-process.

Providers of evidence

44. The new policy context has created a strong demand for evidence, allowing various actors who are suppliers of data and information to play a greater role in policy-making.

45. Think-tanks are major providers of evidence. They are somewhere in the middle of policy and research – they are not neutral because they usually advocate for a political agenda. Other new providers are the so-called “brokerage agencies”, who work as brokers between policy makers and researchers to facilitate the sharing and flow of information⁷. International organisations such as the OECD play an increasingly important role in national policy-making, precisely because they are at the same time both providers of “evidence” and brokers.

International organisations

46. Traditionally, educational policy has been guarded as a national prerogative and has therefore predominantly been defined, and implemented within the realm of the nation state. Educational policy formation was a process of ideological negotiation and struggle between national politicians and stakeholders, these latter being the driving forces behind the formulation of educational policy and the main actors in implementation.

47. The new context of conducting policy described above has opened up a window of opportunity for international organisations operating in policy areas such as education. Historically, UNESCO had a mandate within the United Nations system to foster exchanges in educational policy, particularly through its International Bureau of Education (IBE). Then the World Bank became increasingly involved in support for educational provision in developing countries, which led the Bank into studies, exchanges and recommendations on educational policy. The OECD and the European Union have had activities in education dating back to the 1970s, but in the case of the OECD, its influence on national educational policy-making through the provision of evidence has increased considerably with high profile projects such as PISA

The Role of the Media

48. Today, the media facilitate the process of dialogue and debate between public opinion and policy-makers, and journalists therefore act as important mediators between the political level and the public sphere. This places a special responsibility on the profession of journalist. This responsibility is expressed in a code of ethics and good practice which guide the work of journalists, stating, for example, principles such as 'give voice to the voiceless', 'present competing views', 'distinguish between advocacy and news reporting', 'not oversimplify or misinterpret', 'test the accuracy of information etc'⁸. However, the application of these principles may for a number of reasons not always be as straightforward as expected.

49. First, journalists are, like the majority of other service providers, subject to commercial interests. The media tend to give preference to news that are sensational or in any other way unusual, as this attracts the highest number of viewers. This places education, like any other policy field, in a vulnerable position, as it implies that educational issues are most likely to get reported if they are "bad news", exceptional or troublesome in other ways⁹.

50. Another factor that can sometimes complicate the role of the media as a carrier of information between policy makers and the public is the lack of specialised knowledge within a certain field. Education has traditionally not been seen as a single portfolio¹⁰ for journalists, although today we see an increasing number of specialised education correspondents.

51. We have already mentioned that the media plays a very important role in modern societies as a link between the public and the political level. This gives the media some democratic responsibility as sort of 'gate keeper' of what goes from the public sphere to the political level and vice versa. At the same time, this gives the media (and especially the editors) a very distinct power to decide on and select which stories and messages to bring, the perspectives to be used, or the choice of images. We should also remember that media are not independent: their ownership can have political or ideological affiliations.

52. Media representations therefore play a more important role in policy-making. If, for example, the media present a policy problem under a headline such as "Primary Education Needs Immediate Reform", this presentation frames the problem as urgent and tells the readers that some political action is required, here and now. As such, the media can shape and express public opinion and it can also influence policy-makers' perception of the public will.

The Role of Unions in the New Policy Context

53. The traditional role of unions as representatives of workers has been to secure their wage and working conditions through collective bargaining with employers and "lobbying" for favourable policies and legislation.

54. But the political landscape surrounding unions has changed. With policies being more and more formed by this evidence-agenda, political influence follows the providers of data. This means that the impact of unions is also enhanced by the extent to which they are able to provide research-based arguments and support with them their positions. Today, we therefore see unions increasingly defining themselves as knowledge providers in addition to their more traditional roles.

55. Becoming a supplier of evidence represents an additional task for unions, but a key one if they want to remain a strong and significant voice in current and future policy-making. This does not change the role of unions as first and foremost representatives of workers in social dialogue processes. In order to keep representing workers in the current knowledge society, though, unions need *new* instruments, such as research, which can be used along with the more traditional tools such strikes and bargaining. Moreover, if teachers are considered as a source of knowledge on education, policy makers should also encourage their involvement in research.

2. The OECD and PISA

56. As explained, EI sees PISA and its influence on national policy-making as both a result and a symptom of this new political landscape, where policy-making is formed more and more on the basis of evidence. This section focuses on the OECD and PISA. First, it provides an outline of the OECD and its work on education, and discusses why PISA has gained so broad support, not only from governments, but also from the public. It also deals with some of the methodological issues related to PISA, and whether PISA should be regarded as policy or research. Second, on the basis of the information possessed at the time of writing, PISA 2006 is briefly described.

How does the OECD work?

57. "The Organisation provides a setting where governments can compare policy experiences, seek answers to common problems, and identify good practice and co-ordinate domestic and international policies"¹¹.

58. The OECD and its way of working fit into the new policy context. Specifically, the OECD produces evidence through multilateral surveillance, such as peer reviews, and through collection of statistical indicators. Both working methods follow a similar pattern. The OECD starts with data collection, assessing and identifying the best practices and, based on these, it gives recommendations to governments for use as evidence in national policy-making.

59. By identifying best practices through broad-scale international comparisons and peer reviews, the OECD has been able to create a certain *code of conduct* for member countries. The Organisation itself acts as "*a forum where peer pressure can act as a powerful incentive to improve policy and which produces internationally-agreed instruments, decisions and recommendations...*"¹². Governments can sometimes feel "pressured" to converge towards the policies which are regarded as best practices¹³.

60. The OECD is able to exert this peer pressure and "soft governance" not only because of its mandate and status, but also since it is regarded as an authoritative and impartial source of evidence and advice. The OECD does not have a legally binding mandate on member countries in the field of education, and cannot use regulations and sanctions. It only acts through "soft" power instruments, such as recommendations or guidelines. This specific feature, which might have been regarded as a weakness in the more traditional policy framework, may actually have become a strength in the new policy environment, given the organisation's capacity to develop international comparisons and data gathering mechanisms.

61. Governments often welcome the influence of the OECD, because they see it as a valuable support for their political argumentation at national level. PISA has now been acknowledged not only by governments, but also by the public, making it very difficult for governments to withdraw from PISA. If a country participated once, it is required to continue, because its public opinion expects to know if the education performance has improved, and policy-makers want to demonstrate that progress has been made.

The role of education

62. In the original structure of the OECD there was no general secretariat for education, as education was not regarded as an independent policy field, but as an area linked to labour market policies within the overall framework of economic development¹⁴.

Evolution of the work on education

63. From the late 1980s, the OECD began to take a more active approach in the field of education, mainly upon the request of some prominent member countries who wanted more comparative statistical work on education indicators. Education had become a controversial topic on the political agenda in the US after the report "*A Nation at Risk: Imperatives for Educational Reform*"¹⁵. The report pointed to the American education system as being in deep

crisis, and, by requesting the OECD to conduct a programme on international educational indicators, the American government, especially the Secretary of Education, hoped to export the American debate, so that the crisis of education debate was not only a national problem. The request was supported by the French government, represented by the new socialist Minister of Education, Jean-Pierre Chevènement. He had a more egalitarian agenda for the French educational system and therefore demanded indicators on student performance to prove that the French elitist system had failed¹⁶. This illustrates how governments have somehow supported the emergence of the "what works" approach to policy-making.

64. Budgetary constraints forced governments to pay more attention to the returns from educational spending. Furthermore, globalisation trends led governments to understand that education is central to economic competitiveness. Hence the strong focus on effectiveness and the major demand for educational indicators¹⁷.

The beginning of the education indicators

65. Over the following years, a new strategy to develop comparative indicators was discussed, and its result was the establishment of the *International Indicators of Educational Systems* (INES) project (1988)¹⁸. This work has subsequently evolved in scope, both in quantitative and qualitative terms, with the creation of the OECD Directorate for Education in 2002.

66. PISA was, like Rome, not built in a day. The OECD's work on education indicators was commenced by a demand from some member countries in the mid 1990s "*for more regular and reliable data on the knowledge and skills of their students and the performance of their education systems*"¹⁹. This work on indicators eventually led to what is today known as PISA²⁰, which represents a major but not unique OECD activity in the field of education.

Where are unions?

67. As the OECD is an inter-governmental organisation, education unions may not have a direct role in the decision-making process in PISA nor in other OECD education work. However they are part of a structure of consultancy within the OECD through TUAC (the Trade Union Advisory Committee), which can significantly influence OECD decision-making. Unions can express opinions, and while the consultation process falls short of negotiation, they can influence programmes.

PISA – policy or research?

68. Another important explanatory factor as to why PISA has become so influential is its clear policy orientation. PISA is not only research, for it contains key policy recommendations. This makes it very suitable for political attention, because politicians can access and use PISA without much additional interpretation. It is important to distinguish between the national and international PISA reports, as the first ones are the most policy-oriented.

69. For example, the TIMSS and PIRLS studies, conducted by the *International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement* (IEA) since the late 1950s, have never reached the political attention PISA has received. An important reason for this difference is the fact that PISA provides policy recommendations, while the IEA studies do not. This means that governments have to conduct their own analysis of the results before being able to use the IEA results politically. For example, the IEA does not make any recommendations on the ideal size of schools, so, if governments want to use IEA data to advocate for larger schools, they have to do more work of their own to construct arguments. If policy-makers want to make swift populist decisions, PISA is an easier choice because governments do not have to spend time analysing data – they can just pick the policy recommendations they like.

70. Another reason why PISA has achieved much more political attention is related to the fact that it is not curriculum-driven. PISA is deliberately unrelated to national school curricula and syllabuses. It is a test of "*How good are schools at providing young people with a solid foundation of knowledge and skills that will serve them well for life and learning beyond*

*school?"*²¹ The OECD emphasizes that this approach is *"more forward looking, focusing on young people's ability to use their knowledge and skills to meet real life challenges, rather than merely on the extent to which they have mastered a specific school curriculum"*²².

71. So, according to the OECD, PISA looks at 15 year olds ability to cope with 'everyday life' and whether they are ready to meet 'real-life challenges'. Testing the actual application of knowledge in real life situations is important; however, the extent to which students are able to demonstrate this is limited.

72. How do we decide on a common denominator for what is "everyday life" when there are as many as 57 different countries participating? What is everyday life and real-life challenges in Japan and New Zealand might very well be quite different from what is considered everyday life in Mexico and Belgium. When the OECD defines what knowledge and skills are needed for tomorrow, governments will try to adjust and reform their education systems to these definitions, due to the normative pressure PISA exerts, and facilitated by the strong media exposure. When PISA defines what skills are needed, PISA also tells member countries how to design curricula in reading and writing, maths and science. This implies that PISA tends to favour certain values, educational and political goals.

73. Studies on educational effectiveness have also repeatedly shown that as student tests become more unrelated to their school curricula, the "effect size"^c decreases, i.e. the conclusions have diminishing validity²³. Literacy in mathematics, reading and science is obviously closely linked to what students learn in school, but if an assessment does not look at the congruence between what students have been taught in class according to the defined goals and the degree to which these goals are attained, we cannot say much about the quality of the particular school system, little less about the effectiveness of the education system. However, the fact that PISA does not take the national curricula into account is mostly forgotten when its results are presented and construed by media and politicians. Arguably, such an approach is necessary for PISA to be possible. It is not possible to implement a test like PISA involving national curricula in as many as 57 different countries.

74. Finally, the OECD has, from the beginning, developed a very successful communication strategy, and the release of PISA and the OECD work in general actually come quite close to releases of big, commercial events such as the newest Harry Potter book or the new version of Microsoft Windows – and are almost awaited with the same excitement, not by consumers, but rather by policy-makers.

3. Unions and PISA – experiences so far

75. When EI, almost 10 years ago, recommended unions to remain vigilant, this was mainly due to the risk of indicators being used politically. EI was concerned that the indicators on student performance could be misinterpreted through the media by, for example, only focusing on rankings or by politicians interpreting the results in a certain way in order to promote their own political goals and agendas.

76. Since EI wrote this first circular two PISA cycles have passed, the results of the third will (at the time of writing) be published soon. A number of EI's affiliates have reported that PISA has significantly changed their political opportunity structures and, hence, their involvement in the political decision making process, making it more difficult for unions to come forward with interpretations and messages that are different from the ones presented by media and politicians. These have, broadly speaking, mainly focused on the rankings, and thereby reduced the quality of education to a matter of performing better or worse. This has created a new and very strong discourse in which unions have found it difficult to present a more holistic and comprehensive analysis of PISA, and their views on education in general.

^c Statistical measure of correlation between two variables.

Interpretations of PISA

77. When the media communicate PISA results, the main goal is to attract – and retain - the reader who, most likely, will not have any specialised knowledge on educational measurement of student performance - such as test construction, psychometric models behind tests, methodological limitations when measuring cognition, statistical significance, etc. Such specified knowledge is, of course, not a precondition for understanding that Finland scored higher than Uruguay in the last PISA survey.

78. The lack of specialised knowledge among readers does require the media to exert caution in terms of interpretation. However, journalists who work in the field of education might also not have this specialised knowledge. This can create a difficult situation when the so-called “parachute” journalists communicate to the public information derived from specialised knowledge. This can result grossly oversimplified reporting²⁴.

79. An example of this was the popular media’s coverage of the PISA results in 2003 in Japan. The headlines consistently reported that Japan had slipped, that Japanese children did not study enough, that the skills of Japanese students were on a declining trend and that the quality of education as a result had deteriorated²⁵. The actual situation was that, between the first and the second PISA cycle, the differences were not statistically significant except for the results in mathematics. The politicians and the media’s coverage of the results were highly political. During the previous decades, the Japanese education system had undergone some significant reforms, aiming at creating education for “yutori” (relaxed education and education that would allow children “room to grow”). In spite of Japanese children scoring high in most international assessments, it was becoming clear that the Japanese children also experienced high psychological pressure stemming from exams and long school hours (it was not until 2002 that a 5-day school week was introduced so that children did not have to go to school on Saturdays). For these reasons, the yutori “room-to grow”-reforms were introduced. However, these changes led to critics accusing the reforms of lowering the academic achievements and the PISA results were interpreted in this context, but without any statistical substance behind this interpretation²⁶. The union reports having been contacted by the media, but the media only wanted it to comment on the decline of students’ performance. The media had already framed the articles about PISA from a certain angle – the “decline” angle, making it very difficult for the union to come forward with other perspectives on the results.

80. However, when journalists do not have thorough knowledge of educational issues this does open a *window of opportunity* for unions because they possess this specialised knowledge. An example of this is from Ireland, where journalists used the union’s expertise to get explanations on certain aspects of the report such as investment in education, class size and curriculum change. Likewise, politicians from the opposition contacted the union in order to get explanations of the report. The opposition was receptive to the viewpoints of the union and the opposition spokespersons reiterated the union’s perspective. The union in Ireland reports that the press coverage was generally supportive. A consistent approach at all times was an important explanatory factor as to why politicians listened to the union and its interpretation and contextualisation of the results.

81. However, other unions have had less conducive and favourable conditions, making it more difficult to gain resonance in public debates. In Denmark, for example, the union reported that the government initially did not listen to the union’s interpretation. The liberal-conservative government that came into power in November 2001 had commenced a reform agenda and the results from PISA were largely taken into account. This made it very difficult for the union to come forward with messages different from those of the governments. However, the union repeatedly reiterated the methodological pitfalls of PISA and, on these grounds, warned against making new reforms based solely on the PISA results. The union magazine, *Folkeskolen*, won a journalistic award for its critical and persistent coverage on the PISA results and the politicians and popular media’s simplistic and inadequate coverage of

PISA. However, while union magazines are an important media for unions, the problem is that to a certain extent we are "preaching to the already convinced". In the short term, the effect of the union's attempt to illustrate that PISA is encumbered with numerous methodological problems was limited, and the union was portrayed by the media as reactive and obstinate. However, the union reports that the debate has now become more balanced and comprehensive, with the majority of researchers in education acknowledging and agreeing with the union.

82. In Norway, the union took an assertive approach to PISA. When the union was contacted by the media in order to give interpretations and comments on the PISA results, the main message was that the results should be taken seriously by schools and school authorities, and that every effort should be made to improve the learning environment as well as learning strategies and results. At the same time, the union tried to give realistic and balanced information about PISA, stating that the results should neither be exaggerated nor ignored. Giving balanced information was both necessary and difficult, since the Ministry of Education consistently presented the Norwegian results as "mediocre", rather than using the statistically relevant term "average". In the debate that followed the publication of the PISA results, the union put major emphasis on the need for improved teacher training, both at initial teacher education level and with regard to post-qualification in-service training and further education.

83. In some cases PISA has also created new favourable opportunities for unions because unions have been able to use the results to support *their* arguments. An example of this is from Australia. For years there has been a "falling standards debate" fostered by the Federal Government, and its supports in the business community who have continuously argued that there is a crisis in the Australian education system, that parents are "voting with their feet" by sending their children to private schools and are expressing strong dissatisfaction with public schools, and that Australia is falling behind countries such as Finland, Japan and Korea²⁷. The Federal Government has argued that standardised tests would be a solution to the "crisis" and has now implemented standardised tests which will replace the existing system where every state sets its own test, starting from next year. The union used Australia's relatively good position to argue against the "falling standards debate", and used PISA as evidence to support their argumentation. However, the union does acknowledge that this did not stop the "ferocious-standards-are-falling-movement" led by the Federal Government.

84. A similar example is from the United Kingdom. The unions very actively used the PISA results to argue for greater equity and equal opportunities in the education systems. The unions also used the good results from Finland to argue for higher degrees of autonomy for teachers. While giving PISA a high profile the Government ignored PISA's conclusions about differentiation of provision within schools having a much greater chance of achieving equity in high levels of outcome than through different types of school'

85. Another case of unions' use of PISA is Poland, where the union has actively used the PISA results to "prove" to the government that there were severe problems in the Polish educational system. At the same time, the union took a very active approach to PISA and arranged a number of conferences with the media, politicians and experts, while at the same time encouraging the debates on PISA to become less emotional.

86. However, there is one particularly interesting case where a union, quite ironically, has not been able to use the PISA results as argumentation for reforms or funding – Finland. Precisely because Finland did so well, the union found itself in a dead-lock situation where it could not use PISA to argue for increased funding to education or better working conditions for teachers. However, while the good results have made it difficult for unions to use the results to support their arguments, it has certainly opened up new opportunities for politicians. The union reports that its attempts to argue for more funding are answered with: "no need for that, as you are already doing so well". To a certain extent, the union feels "punished" for the good results. PISA, in spite of the positive results, has actually worsened

the union's political opportunities. If Finland scores lower in the next PISA study the unions can then argue that the deterioration is caused by the "laissez-faire" attitude of the government. But unions are actually in a kind of no-win situation: if the country scores low, teachers are "blamed" for the poor results, and, if the country scores high, it also puts the union in a disadvantageous situation.

87. As mentioned in the beginning, educational issues are most likely to get reported if they are "bad news", exceptional or troublesome in other ways. This is clearly illustrated with an example from Denmark. We compared the news coverage of PISA and the IEA Civic Education Study (a non-core subject matter which looks at students' knowledge about democracy, opinions and perceptions of national identity and social cohesion). We made a search on Info Media which is a search engine for all Danish written news sources. We searched for articles containing either the combination "PISA" + "OECD" or "IEA" + "civic education". The search on PISA gave more than 6000 results, however, it should be mentioned that in the majority of the articles PISA was only mentioned in a subordinate clause (we shall return to this later). The interesting point here is not the intense exposure of PISA. Rather, it is that the IEA Civic Education Study was mentioned in only 2 articles in spite of the fact that the Danish children scored the highest in the IEA Civic Education Study. This illustrates a point about how the mechanisms of journalism can work: bad news or no news. The (bad) PISA results were exposed persistently, telling the Danish public that the results were poor, that children could not read sufficiently well and that schools were not sufficiently academic. This is not the place to go into a lengthy discussion of whether or not it is actually the case that Danish children cannot read sufficiently well – the point to be made is, that when the public repeatedly and only hears about the bad results from PISA, then it becomes very difficult for a positive story on education such as the IEA Civic Education Study to gain resonance because the public has already been told that the education system is in a poor shape.

Unions' interaction with media on PISA

88. When we asked our member organisations if they had been "contacted by the media in order to give interpretations/feedback on the PISA results after they were released", 9 out of 24 reported that they had in fact not been contacted by the media. In Canada (British Columbia), the media relied solely on government sources to contextualize and interpret the PISA results even if there were several other sources they could have used such as unions, or researchers working on education. The result was that the government was able to use the good PISA results to say that the system with regular testing and standardized curriculum was effective and excellent, with these claims being uncontested and unchallenged by other sources²⁸. These findings are consistent with others who have looked at the media coverage of education²⁹. A journalist should have the freedom to decide how he or she wants to cover a story, and it would be quite desirable to include different views and perspectives in a newspaper article. However, the Canadian case showed that some media in the country chose systematically to cite only government sources. When this happens, the media do not give equivalent treatment to competing points of view and as such they violate a fundamental code of ethics in journalism, namely that of a balanced representation of competing points of view. In other words, while the media supposedly had a role as "gatekeeper" between research and the public, it went along with government-inspired "spin" on the results. At first view, this contradicts the earlier assertion that the media only reports bad news. But the key issue here is government capacity to put "spin" on the results according to whether they want to play them up as "bad" or "good".

89. People have opinions about education. In so far that most of us have personal experiences with education, this is not surprising. However, our opinions about education are not only shaped by our own experiences, they are obviously also highly open to external sources of information such as the media. Therefore only presenting one point of view, as the case with Canada where only government sources were used, the media clearly creates a systematic bias in the coverage which almost inevitably will influence the way people think about education. And the media is not only able to select who should have a voice in the

debate, they are also able to select how a story should be presented, i.e. they can *frame* the story. This brings us to an essential point with regard to the political use of PISA and what role the media plays in this.

Examples of media reports:

"The level of educational achievement of South Korean students is ranked as one of the highest in the world, while the educational environment in South Korea still lags behind" (*The Hankyoreh 8 December 2004*)

"Japanese high school students have slipped in the latest international ranking of reading and mathematics skills by the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development" (*The Japan Times 8 December 2004*)

"Canada ranks in top six countries of reading, mathematics and science, major OECD study concludes" (*The National Post 5 December 2004*).

"Finnish teenagers come top again in school skills" (*Financial Times 7 December 2004*)

90. When the media repeatedly reports the PISA results in terms of rankings and ratings as in the examples above, it provides the public with a certain way of thinking about education. When education is restrained to mostly being an issue about how high we rank and that quality of education and student performance therefore can be measured in quantitative terms, it automatically narrows the solution to educational problems to a matter of simply ranking higher. This is also one of the unions' main concerns regarding PISA. The majority of unions reported that they actually find the information provided in PISA is very useful and valuable, but that their main objection to PISA is the media and politicians' narrow focus on the rankings because this gives a simplified and incorrect presentation of issues which are much more complex.

PISA – a never ending story?

91. One last point refers to how the unprecedented coverage of PISA has created a sense of it being the only and infallible truth. Through the online media monitoring agent Meltwaters, we have gone through approximately 200 articles which included the word "PISA". Consistent with our findings in the Danish case, the majority of articles referring to PISA actually only mention or refer to PISA in a subordinate clause. The main articles about PISA are concentrated around its releases, after which the attention eases off.

92. But the articles which only mention PISA in a subordinate clause might in fact have an even stronger impact on the public perception of education than the more lengthy articles where PISA is the main story. Sentences such as: "As shown in PISA...", "We know from PISA that..." present PISA to readers as a fact, as a piece of definitive evidence that is not debatable. These articles will cover everything from labour market to research and PISA is thrown in to support or illustrate another argument. This has created a situation where PISA has become a trump card which can defeat all other kinds of arguments – when the PISA card has been played then all other arguments have been cleared. The most "dangerous" media coverage of the PISA is an article where PISA is not the main story, but where PISA is brought in to support other arguments. It has a strong self-reinforcing, psychological mechanism; when the reader repeatedly reads "as the PISA studies have shown...", PISA is presented as some definitive truth and the more times we read it, the less we question it and the more of a "truth" it becomes.

4. What can unions do?

93. The paper made an attempt to outline the preconditions seen as the main underlying factors for enabling PISA to reach such broad media and political exposure and political use. To sum up, PISA is a result and symptom of a new way of conducting policy that increasingly focuses on evidence and effectiveness. This has opened up for a number of new actors in political decision-making – actors who are suppliers of evidence - creating a situation where policy-makers to a certain extent can “mix and match”/“cut and paste” evidence according to their perception of what works. A result, evidence works as new “ideological” input in the formation of educational policy. The political use of PISA, or of other pieces of evidence, is therefore also an inherent part of modern policy-making, as evidence is obviously not value-free, but will always be embedded in and a reflection of a certain perception of society.

94. This has significantly changed the political opportunities for unions. Where PISA in some cases has created new possibilities for unions, it also has, to a greater or lesser extent, created more difficult conditions for a majority of unions when they attempt to make their point on education in public debates. Broadly speaking, national politicians seem to have accepted PISA and its recommendations as a kind of imperative which determines and regulates national educational policy. This “PISA-discourse” has, to some degree, made the consultation of unions, where they as social partners are invited to participate in the policy-making process and present ideas and input, more difficult.

95. This brings us to the cardinal question: What can unions do to break through this “PISA-discourse”?

96. The following recommendations to unions are rather general, and organizations will need to take account of different national and cultural contexts. These recommendations should only be considered as suggestions to unions which they are invited to use to the extent they may find them helpful.

Unions' involvement in PISA

97. To begin with, it is crucial that unions at the national level actively seek involvement in PISA. As already mentioned, National Project Managers play a key role in PISA as they are responsible for the actual implementation of PISA and for the further work on PISA. We know from the questionnaires about unions' relations to the National Project Managers that most of them do not contact unions, and, therefore, we recommend that unions contact the National Project Managers, not only to be able to obtain information on current developments and the status on the work on PISA, but also to offer our expertise as practitioners.

98. This brings us to another important key recommendation. In a political landscape where policy-making is increasingly founded on evidence, it becomes absolutely crucial for unions to be another provider of evidence. While several unions already have research units, this represents a task which is becoming more and more important. Unions are not – and neither they should be - research institutes nor think-tanks, but it is essential that unions more explicitly think of themselves as providers of evidence for external purposes. Traditionally, the role of research units have been internal and seen as a way to bring know-how into the union's work. But with policy-making becoming more and more evidence-based, research and the production of evidence also serve more external purposes, as research units not only need to bring information to the union, but also need to bring it *out* to be acknowledged as a provider of evidence. Again, if any, unions are as practitioners a valuable and important source of evidence, but they also need to think of themselves as such.

Communication and spin doctors?

99. With policy-making also more and more taking place through the media, another challenge becomes how to gain access to them. But, as unions almost unanimously reported, they find this very difficult. It is, therefore, important that unions actively try to seek relations and establish networks with journalists working on education. As the example from Ireland

shows, good relations with journalists not only can help unions to get access to embargoed material such as PISA, but can also enable unions to have their views and opinions reflected in media representations.

100. While “spin doctors” have some quite negative connotations, a more goal-orientated communication from unions is one way to manoeuvre in a highly meditated policy-process. Politicians use it, and, whether we like it or not, spin has become a part of modern policy-making. This is not to say that education unions should simply reason that: “because the others do it, we also do it”. But unions definitely need to pay more attention to their media strategies, and take into account that politicians use “spin”.

More research and collaboration

101. Communication requires a substantive content in the messages to be communicated. Broadly speaking, today messages are only valid if they are “evidence-based” – or, as Andreas Schleicher, Head of the PISA Team at the OECD, puts it “*without data, you are just another person with an opinion*”. This means that even though we might in fact believe that education should per se be a public good, this is not regarded by policy actors as a valid argument if it is not “evidence-based”, but, rather, based on an a priori “ideological” value. Unions should be able to argue with facts that public education can work and be effective.

102. As discussed numerous times in EI’s Research Network, unions need to join forces and resources if they want to be considered as a significant counterpart to the increasing amount of evidence produced not only the OECD, but also by think tanks, and politically appointed commissions. This brings us to a somewhat philosophical, yet crucial question – what evidence is evidence? The nature of evidence varies, but so far it has, broadly speaking, been reduced to the pragmatics of technical efficiency and effectiveness. We need evidence based on other parameters than effectiveness. We are not suggesting that unions should undertake a lot of research, but unions could more actively seek collaboration with scholars and researchers from universities and research institutes. PISA does not have the monopoly on the truth, so we need counter- research that can refute, contest and challenge.

103. This work has already been initiated with the EI Research Network, but we can only reiterate the need for unions to strengthen it. We need to be up-to-date with educational research, not only from the OECD, but also from scholars who work within the field. Besides, more “everyday” and perhaps regional collaboration between unions would be an important step forward. Unions who work in similar national and cultural contexts might find it useful to exchange ideas and experiences on a more regular basis.

Empowerment of teachers

104. However, external communication and research are not enough. We would like to point to the need for and importance of internal communication – the communication to unions’ members, to the teachers. We have a large responsibility to communicate directly to teachers and make sure that they understand and know the results in PISA.

105. Teachers and their work are, not only after the release of PISA, but continuously throughout the year, publicly judged and evaluated under intense and often not objective media coverage. We asked unions in the questionnaire “if teachers had been blamed or acknowledged” for the results in PISA, and in most cases unions reported that teachers had publicly been blamed by politicians. We have a responsibility to make sure that teachers actually know what the PISA results mean, that they understand the premises underlying PISA and, indirectly, the premises on which their work is judged. This link is increasingly important with the upcoming OECD Teacher Survey (TALIS). In the end, we can (fortunately we might say) not tell the media what to communicate to the public, and what the politicians should do, but we can make sure that teachers understand what is going on.

Conclusions

1. The impact of PISA through the media is undeniable. PISA has become a reference in debates over educational policy in most of the 57 participating countries. For these reasons, if no other, education unions are giving PISA attention. EI has produced this guide to help member unions prepare for the release of the PISA 2006 report on 4 December.
2. There are other reasons for giving attention to PISA. The statisticians and researchers who work with the OECD to produce the report have succeeded in drawing out a host of interesting correlations between the performance of 15 year-olds, their socio-economic backgrounds and certain characteristics of school systems, presenting them in tables which allow comparisons among the participating countries. This data has been useful for education unions too. Particularly, the PISA 2003 report showed convincingly that sound education policies can enhance both quality and equity.
3. However, the data in the comparative tables can be simplified by the media into "league tables" of country rankings. The same data can be used or misused by politicians to serve their political agendas. One of the lessons to be drawn from a review of the PISA 2003 experience is that Education Ministers and their advisers who get advance notice of the report, will try to put "spin" on the data to suit their own purposes.
4. Education unions should not wait until the PISA 2006 report is released on 4 December to prepare their responses. Although we will not have the report in advance, we already know a great deal about what PISA is and what PISA is not. We too can brief the media – and our members. The EI/OECD/TUAC seminar on 13 November is intended to help EI member unions with this preparation. When briefing the media – or preparing information on union websites and in union journals – it is important to keep PISA in perspective. It is based on a necessarily simple set of questions which can at best provide a "snapshot" of performance in certain skills among 15 year-old pupils, of their socio-economic backgrounds, and of certain characteristics of school systems. As stated earlier, the correlations and international comparison produce interesting, sometimes fascinating data. But it should not be forgotten that the basis for this data is rather simple. It does not convey the complexity nor the breadth of education.
5. Unions could obtain, examples of items from the PISA 2006 questionnaire used in each country, and show them to the media, to help them get a better understanding of the nature of the questionnaires which collect the data.
6. The context for PISA varies from country to country. EI recommends that each member union identify the key messages that it wants to convey to the public and base its media work before and after 4 December on them.
7. A key task for each union is to inform and educate our own membership, the teachers in the schools, if possible before the release date of 4 December, certainly in the days that follow, and in the longer term. Union web-sites, articles in union journals, union meetings and special seminars can all play a role.
8. Union research also has an important role to play in at least two ways. Firstly, analyzing PISA, relating the results to the national context, and preparing explanatory information for union leadership and for the membership. Secondly, compiling other studies and literature on issues of quality and equity, and issues of pupil achievement, so as to balance and if necessary challenge the PISA results with a broader picture.

9. Looking to the future, EI member organizations are encouraged to establish contact with PISA national project managers and national committees. In a few countries, unions have been able to participate in the work of the national committees, and their contributions and expertise have won respect. In other countries, cooperative relations have been established, enabling unions to exert positive influence while gaining insights into PISA processes at the national level. Whenever we can make a link between union work at the national level and the work of EI and TUAC at OECD level, that is a plus for the union movement.

10. EI's Research Unit, working with the TUAC secretariat in Paris, is ready to respond to any further questions you may have.

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- ⁵ *Ibid*
- ⁶ Hidden Privatisation in the public education sector: preliminary report, Stephen J. Ball and Deborah Youdell, EI, Berlin, July 2007, para 3.1
- ⁷ Examples of these brokerage agencies are numerous and we suggest readers to consult the recent OECD publication "Evidence in Education – linking research and policy" for a more thorough overview
- ⁸ Society of Professional Journalists: Code of ethics. Retrieved from <http://www.spj.org/>
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