

# International Organizations and Evidence-based Education Policy: Their evident relation

## Organismos Internacionales y Políticas educativas basadas en evidencias: la evidente relación

<https://doi.org/10.4438/1988-592X-RE-2023-400-572>

**Javier M. Valle López**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0146-3229>

Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

**Lucía Sánchez-Urán Díaz**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2086-9451>

Universidad Camilo José Cela

### **Abstract**

This article aims to demonstrate the close relationship between international organizations and evidence-based education policy. It begins by showing the impact of the proposals of three international organizations (UNESCO, the OECD, and the European Union) on education systems (*soft policy*) through an example: lifelong learning. The aim is to illustrate how the discourses of international organizations become educational trends. It describes how three international organizations with great influence on educational trends (UNESCO and OECD in their global perspective and the European Union in its regional perspective) have been crafting a discourse over the last several decades in favor of evidence-based educational policies. Then, by applying the analysis of supranational education, it compares the views of these three international organizations, seeking out their common ground by gathering perspectives from programs and documents that justify and highlight this matter. Subsequently, recently published OECD (2022) and European Union (European Commission, 2021) reports on the state of education are analyzed, sorting out the kind of indicators used to evaluate education systems. These indicators are

considered a tool for decision-making characteristic of evidence-based education policy. Finally, the article concludes by presenting a critical reflection on evidence-based education policy, noting that the indicators used in the reports assume an economic view of education, in which future employability conditions the evaluation of education systems. The article calls into question the quantitative view in the evaluation of education systems as "objective truth" without considering other explanatory and reflective elements such as the context or the humanistic vision of education itself.

*Keywords:* educational policy, international organizations, Supranational Education, evidence, educational indicators, educational improvement.

### Resumen

Este artículo trata de demostrar la estrecha relación entre los Organismos internacionales y la política educativa basada en evidencias. Para ello comienza mostrando el impacto de las propuestas de tres Organismos Internacionales (UNESCO, OCDE y Unión Europea) en materia de educación sobre los sistemas educativos (*soft policy*) mediante un ejemplo: el aprendizaje permanente. Se pretende ilustrar como los discursos de los organismos internacionales se convierten en tendencias educativas. Se describe cómo tres Organismos Internacionales con gran influencia en las tendencias educativas (UNESCO y OCDE en perspectiva global y Unión Europea en perspectiva regional) han ido glosando a lo largo de las últimas décadas un discurso en favor de las políticas educativas basadas en la evidencia. Para terminar, y aplicando el análisis propio de la educación supranacional, contrasta las tres visiones de esos organismos internacionales procurando alinear el hilo conductor que las atraviesa recogiendo las visiones y perspectivas de programas y documentos que justifican y sitúan el foco en el tema que nos ocupa. Posteriormente, se realiza un análisis de los informes sobre el estado de la educación publicados recientemente por la OCDE (2022) y la Unión Europea (Comisión Europea, 2021), identificando los indicadores que utilizan para evaluar los sistemas educativos. Unos indicadores que son considerados una herramienta para la toma de decisiones característica de la política educativa basada en evidencias. Finalmente, las conclusiones del artículo presentan una reflexión crítica sobre la política educativa basada en evidencias, Fruto de esa reflexión se ha observado que los indicadores utilizados en los informes asumen una visión economicista de la educación, en la que la empleabilidad futura condiciona la evaluación de los sistemas educativos. Se cuestiona la visión cuantitativa en la evaluación de los sistemas educativos como "verdad objetiva" sin considerar otros elementos explicativos y reflexivos como el contexto o la propia visión humanista de la educación.

*Palabras clave:* política educativa, organismos internacionales, Educación Supranacional, evidencias, indicadores educativos, mejora educativa.

## Introduction: International Organizations and supranational trends in education

The influence of international organizations on national educational trends and reforms is undeniable, with many of their recommendations being taken up by the countries themselves (Matarranz and Pérez Roldán, 2016; Valle, 2012,2013). Indeed, as Valle (2015) notes, one of the tasks of these organizations is to set up transnational frameworks for interpreting the educational reality. In this globalized world, their proposals often play a decisive role in efforts at harmonizing elements among educational systems.

Spanish educational legislation itself is a clear example of how national educational systems take to these frameworks. Its laws have long been citing the educational approaches proposed by international organizations. This can be seen in the following excerpts taken from the last two organic laws of the education system. First, the preamble of the 2013 LOMCE makes several references to the OECD and its data, such as those obtained with PISA, which are used to justify reforms in the education system:

However, the current system does not make progress towards improving the quality of education, as evidenced by the poor results obtained by students in international assessment tests such as PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), the high dropout rates in education and vocational training, and the small number of students who achieve excellence (LOMCE, 2013, p.6).

Second, in the recent LOMLOE (2020), recommendations from UNESCO and the European Union are also considered as reference points for the education system:

The years that have passed since the approval of the LOE make it advisable to review some of its measures and accommodate them to the current challenges of education, which we share with the objectives set by the European Union and UNESCO for the decade 2020/2030 (LOMLOE, 2020, p. 122870).

There are paradigmatic examples that illustrate how the most globally widespread trends in education have arisen precisely from proposals put

forth by international organizations for a *soft policy* (Diestro and Valle, 2015) that has a direct impact on national laws. One of them is representative of how international organizations have brought about trends that are materialized in the policies and measures proposed by nations: lifelong learning.

## Lifelong learning

The lifelong learning concept is closely intertwined with the development of competencies in education, this approach being understood as the one that best represents the need to know, to know how to do, and to know how to be throughout life. The impact of lifelong learning and, therefore, the commitment to a competency-based approach, on national education affirms that these perspectives have largely been accepted as realities in education systems.

By as early as the 1970s, UNESCO began publishing various reports whose central theme was "*Lifelong Education*" (Lengrand, 1970; Faure et al. (1973); Dave, 1975; Lynch, 1977). Interest continued over the years, and lifelong education (which can also be called lifelong learning<sup>1</sup>) became a point addressed in a report published by UNESCO "*Learning: The Treasure Within*", which is still a reference today:

It is the idea of lifelong education that must be both reconsidered and expanded, because in addition to the necessary adaptations related to the mutations of professional life, it must be a continuous structuring of the human person, of his knowledge and aptitudes, but also of his faculty of judgment and action. It must enable him to become aware of himself and his environment and invite him to play his social role at work and in the city (Delors, 1996, p.15).

The 2030 Sustainable Development Goals are currently at the heart of many political and educational dialogs, debates, and reflections. In terms of the educational goals within them, Goal 4 is the best proof of the consideration of lifelong learning: "*Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*". This lifelong learning perspective is a key element of the goal from its very

---

<sup>1</sup> The evolution of the term lifelong learning and its use by UNESCO and other international organizations can be found in the document published by UNESCO (2020).

wording. In the Incheon Declaration, which structures the framework for action of SDG4, the commitment is clear:

We commit ourselves to promoting quality lifelong learning opportunities for all, in all contexts and at all levels of education. This includes increased and equal access to quality technical and vocational education and training, higher education and research, with due attention to quality assurance. (...) We further commit to ensure that all youth and adults, especially girls and women, achieve relevant and recognized levels of excellence in functional literacy and numeracy and acquire life skills, as well as be provided with adult learning, education and training opportunities (UNESCO, 2016, p. 8).

Further evidence of the emphasis given to lifelong learning is the existence of a specific institute dedicated to this matter: the *Institute for Lifelong Learning* (created in 1951 as a foundation, it became a UNESCO institute in 2006). Its main lines of work are lifelong learning policies, adult learning and education, literacy and basic skills (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, n.d.), as well as the publication of the report *Reimagining Our Futures Together* (UNESCO, 2022a).

In 1973 a document entitled "*Recurrent education: a strategy for lifelong learning*" was published, the seed of what is known today as lifelong learning. Since then, the OECD has been unflagging in its efforts to support lifelong learning policies that ensure competency development as workers. As Valle (2018) rightly points out, the OECD assumes a competency-based perspective of education linked to lifelong learning because of the relationship it establishes between employability and economic growth.

Lifelong learning is key if individuals are to succeed in labor markets and societies shaped by megatrends, such as increases in life expectancy, rapid technological changes, globalisation, migration, environmental changes and digitalisation, as well as sudden shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic. In a fast-changing and uncertain world, lifelong learning can help individuals adapt and become resilient to external shocks, lowering their vulnerability. (...) This calls for evidence on the best ways to support lifelong learning journeys so that individuals can "learn how to learn" (OECD, 2021, p.23).

This excerpt from the report *OECD Skills Outlook 2021: Learning for Life* explicitly shows how the OECD links lifelong learning to the labor

market. The report analyzes which policies and measures are key to enhancing the skills as a way to continue advancing in lifelong learning.

According to Ríos (2006), lifelong learning in the European Union has gone through a number of different stages. In the first stage (1950-1972) lifelong education was associated with the literacy of the population, vocational training, and the training of workers in the workplace. In the second stage (1993-1995), a new idea of lifelong education was developed, understanding it as a necessity in the face of a changing world and the need for citizens to adapt rather than being limited to literacy, vocational training, and workers' training. In the third stage (1996-1999), lifelong education became consolidated in the European Union (EU). And finally, in the last stage, lifelong learning has taken on great importance as its repercussions for the future of the EU begin to be argued. This stage, which runs from 2000 to 2020, is referred to by Matarranz et al. (2020) as the Strategic Programs stage. The Lisbon Council (2000) was the first step in a series of reports, proposals, and recommendations that steadfastly adopted the goal of improving their citizens' skills in order to improve the economy. Thus, lifelong learning was put forth as the way to face a changing world and society. The Lisbon Council resulted in the Work Strategy 2000-2010 (E&T 2010), the *Council Resolution on Lifelong Learning (2002)* and the *Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning (2006)*.

However, the year 2007 is particularly noteworthy since from that year until 2013 the first Lifelong Learning Program was developed, considered the first EU macro-program (Matarranz et al., 2020). Subsequently, in the development of the Framework for European Cooperation in Education, one of the strategic goals set in the 2010-2020 work strategy was "Making Lifelong Learning and learner mobility a reality". In the European Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training for the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030), one of the strategic priorities is making *lifelong learning and mobility a reality for all*. Indeed, lifelong learning is reflected as one of the educational pillars of the EU:

“Lifelong learning permeates the overall vision and objectives of education and training in the EU and encompasses all levels and types of education and training, as well as non-formal and informal learning, in a holistic manner” (2021, p.5).

## Evidence-based education policy and international organizations

The previous section showed how some discourses of international organizations create educational trends whose impact takes on global dimensions. The next objective is to show that evidence-based education policy is also one of these discourses and to demonstrate that it has been promoted by international organizations, which are themselves responsible for providing much of the "key" evidence to the states themselves. In addition, an analysis will be made of the indicators contemplated in reports that the agencies themselves claim are a suitable source of consultation of evidence, and common and divergent points will be identified.

First, however, the matter of the polysemy of the term evidence must be addressed. Its multiple meanings become more complicated depending on what is considered evidence when referring to educational policies. However, within the line of evidence-based policies, evidence acquires the *status* of hard and fast knowledge, true and generalizable knowledge; a highly questionable claim in the field of education (Thoilliez, 2017). Given the influence of international organizations on the educational agenda, of interest here is finding out the role evidence and educational policies play in their discursive framework.

### The discourse of international organizations on evidence-based education policies

This section revisits documents and programs published by the specific and most relevant international organizations on the study of evidence-based education policy.

### UNESCO and evidence-based education policies

In the case of UNESCO, the steps regarding evidence-based policy are illustrated in the configuration of its programs and projects.

First comes *the Management of Social Transformations (MOST) Program*. This intergovernmental program, which began in 1994, focuses on improving the link between knowledge and action. Specifically, it seeks

to ensure that policy formulation is based on evidence and research results with a social perspective in which human rights and interculturality are defining characteristics of the program. Its main mission is thus stated in the Comprehensive Strategy document for the MOST Program, 2016-2021:

MOST's specific mission is to support Member States in improving participatory policy-making processes on the basis of intercultural dialogue through a strengthened research-policy interface that uses science-based knowledge focused on human needs and human rights, primarily from the social sciences and the humanities, to contribute to the establishment of a culture of evidence-informed decision-making policies (2016, p.5).

The Mahatma Gandhi Institute for Peace and Sustainable Development conducts the *International Science and Evidence-based Education Assessment* (ISEE). The purpose of this measure is to conduct a scientifically rigorous assessment to inform policy formulation at all levels.

The ISEE Assessment is a first of its kind for the education sector, attempting to identify a way forward for education and learning according to an evidence based multidisciplinary assessment of the state of education across the globe (UNESCO, 2022b, p.17).

## The OECD and evidence-based education policies

Many of the milestones in the OECD discourse on evidence-based policy can be found in the period 2004-2006. During those years, the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI-OECD) held a series of seminars with researchers and policymakers from OECD countries to discuss methods, costs, advantages, and disadvantages of how educational research, and specifically the evidence thereof, can be used to address the educational challenges countries face (OECD, 2007). These seminars and meetings are the prelude to the publication *Evidence in Education: Linking Research and Policy* (2007).

That article confirms the OECD's perspective on the need to combine education and research, basing educational policy on evidence from

studies. It is the most explicit on the subject, providing framework for this way of understanding education policy.

As mentioned at the beginning of this section, excerpts from the publication can shed light on the OECD's discourse on evidence-based policy. It begins with the executive summary itself:

There is increasing pressure across OECD countries for greater accountability and effectiveness in education policies and systems. Still, available information often does not provide the elements necessary for decision-making, either because the rigorous research relevant to policy needs has not been conducted, or the research that is available does not suggest a single course of action.... It discusses what constitutes evidence for research in education, how that evidence can best be utilised (OECD, 2007, p.9).

This extract identifies the *effectiveness* of education systems as one of the justifications for the implementation of evidence-based policies (evidence that must be rigorous), together with the increased interest in educational outcomes.

Key factors underlying this change are a greater concern with student achievement outcomes; a related explosion of available evidence due to a greater emphasis on testing and assessment; more explicit and vocal dissatisfaction with education systems, nationally and locally; increased access to information via the Internet and other technologies; and resulting changes in policy decision-making. These are accentuated by broader issues to do with the perceived legitimacy of policy-making in general. (...) Today there is a mounting preoccupation with what happens as a result of these investments and activities (...) In other words, policy makers are increasingly interested in what education actually delivers - and therefore with what educational research can tell us about that. A consequence of this has been the explosion of evidence of different kinds resulting from the enormous increase in testing and assessment. A significant force behind this orientation to outcomes has been the greater interest shown by treasuries and finance ministries in the effectiveness of educational expenditure, as a major component of public expenditure generally. (...). The challenge is to gather evidence which is both appropriate and convincing. This is especially the case where the request is that impacts and effectiveness be given monetary values (OECD, 2007, p.17).

The OECD adopts a discourse in which justification for evidence-based policies is based on set of both student and system outcomes for policymaking that act as accountability mechanisms from an economic point of view. Therefore, the implementation of more tests and assessments that provide the data (evidence) necessary for decision-making is also justified. The most widely covered example, since it has also gained the media spotlight, is PISA. PISA is the most faithful representation of a globalizing effort to assess competencies in more than 65 countries (Calero and Choi, 2012).

## The European Union and evidence-based education policies

The emphasis on the defense of evidence-based education policy has also been very present in the European Union over the last 20 years. In *the Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament "Efficiency and equity in European education and training systems"* (2006), the idea of evaluation for obtaining solid data to help understand and monitor education systems is expressed. Indeed, accountability has become a central issue in the global educational agenda (Parcerisa and Verger, 2016).

Education and training systems need a culture of evaluation. To be effective in the long term, policies need to be based on sound data. For Member States to understand what is happening in their systems and to be able to monitor them, they must have channels for relevant research, with a statistical infrastructure to collect the necessary data and mechanisms for evaluating progress in policy implementation (European Commission, 2006, p.4).

Similarly, and continuing along the same lines, the Council of Europe (2009) stated its position clearly on a strategic framework for European cooperation in the field of education and training (E&T 2020):

High quality will only be achieved through the efficient and sustainable use of resources, both public and private, as appropriate, and by promoting evidence-based policy and practice in education and training (Council of Europe, 2009, p. 4).

However, one of the turning points for the EU in its advocacy for evidence-based policy is the creation of two projects: *Evidence-based Policies in Education Project* (EIPEE) (2010-2011); and the *Evidence-based Policies and Practices in Education in Europe Project* (EIPPEE) (2011-2013). Both projects were funded by the European Commission Directorate for Education and Culture, within the Education for Life strategy towards 2020. One of the goals of these projects was to promote evidence-based policies and measures and was featured as an outcome of the EIPPEE NETWORK (EIPPEE, 2011). Thus, the following excerpt shows the vision on evidence:

Although it is widely recognized that education policy and practice should be evidence-based, not knowing how to use research does not allow many to take full advantage of it. The definition of evidence is quite broad and can include expert knowledge, statistics, stakeholder consultations, evaluations, internet sources, as well as research-based evidence (EIPPEE, 2011).

The last publication to highlight here is the Eurydice report "*Support Mechanisms for Evidence-based Policy-Making in Education*" (2017). This report maps support mechanisms that can be used for evidence-based policymaking, describing procedures and practices that justify evidence-based policymaking in countries of the Eurydice network. The EU justifies evidence-based education policy from an economic and social perspective, deeming that such evidence will help in allocating sufficient resources to education as well as in improving educational practices themselves.

## The evidence that matters in international organizations

A look through the websites of international organizations shows specific sections about evidence that stands out as decisive in political decision-making. The aspects featured on the web pages are understood to be ones that, in today's society, are meant to disseminate the lines of action that define each organization's work.

On the OECD website, in the areas on education, there is a section called "measuring results" (OECD, n.d.). This section states the following:

"*Decisions on education policies should always be based on the best possible evidence*". This description is followed by links to different reports on standardized assessments that provide statistical indicators (PISA, Education at a Glance, International Early Learning and Child Well-Being Study, The Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC), Study on Social and Emotional Skills, Higher Education Policy, Measuring Innovation in Education). Therefore, it may be said that the evidence that the OECD considers to be decisive for taking policy measures amounts to statistical indicators. In other words, a quantitative and outcome-based view is assumed as the starting point for policy making.

At the European level, the European Commission in its Education section defends quantitative (statistical) data for the development of evidence-based policies. To that end, it takes as an example the results of its own reports and those of other organizations such as the PISA data (OECD):

Statistics are a fundamental tool used by policy makers, researchers, journalists, citizens and businesses in their work and daily lives. The availability of reliable, high-quality data is essential to support evidence-based policy making and effective evaluation and monitoring of European Union (EU) policies.

Reliable statistics also play a crucial role in countering the spread of misinformation in public and political debates. The EU institutions, including the European Commission, produce a wide range of statistics on the policy areas in which the Union and its Member States are active (European Commission, n.d.).

Moreover, they state the advantages of statistical data collected for making comparisons between regions and countries and for making future recommendations. In short, the agencies consider the indicators taken from statistics to be the evidence par excellence that can be used for educational policy decisions.

The next step is therefore to determine which indicators are featured in the reports from international organizations. To that end, a compilation will be made here of the indicators of education systems covered in the latest reports by international organizations. Following this compilation, similarities and divergences are found resulting from the comparison between them.

In the case of UNESCO, although it has an extensive bank of statistical data<sup>2</sup>, it no longer presents global comparative reports<sup>3</sup> of education systems as it used to do until a decade ago within the framework of the *Global Education Digest* series. Starting in the 2000s, it began the *Global Monitoring Report* series, but these reports focus on very specific topics that make it difficult to monitor specific indicators historically. Thus, the focus here will be on the OECD and the European Union as the international organizations that currently have the most complete reports overall, comparatively, on education systems. The objective here will be to determine which elements of analysis each of these two organizations use through their most recent reports.

## The OECD: “Education at a Glance 2022”

This report analyzes the state of education in OECD countries and other partner economies. It is one of the OECD's flagship publications in the field of education. The OECD defines it as the authoritative source of data on the state of education worldwide. It is an annual publication that presents information on the structure, performance, and resources of education systems in OECD countries. The following table (Table I) shows a list of the chapters and indicators included in the latest report, published in 2022.

As can be seen in the table, the indicators addressed are structured into four chapters:

- The results of educational institutions and the impact of learning
- Access to education, participation and progress
- Financial resources invested in education
- Teachers, the learning environment and the organization of schools.

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://uis.unesco.org/>

<sup>3</sup> The history of the reports can be accessed on the *Supranational Education Library* (SEL) page of the Research Group on “Supranational Education Policies” (GIPES) of the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid.

**TABLE I.** Indicators of the "Education at a Glance" report (2022)

<b>CHAPTER</b>	<b>INDICATOR</b>
The output of educational institutions and the impact of learning	Indicator A1. To what level have adults studied?
	Indicator A2. Transition from education to work: Where are today's youth?
	Indicator A3. How does educational attainment affect participation in the labor market?
	Indicator A4. What are the earnings advantages from education? What are the earnings advantages from education?
	Indicator A6. How are social outcomes related to education?
	Indicator A7. To what extent do adults participate equally in education and learning?
Access to education, participation and progress	Indicator B1. Who participates in education?
	Indicator B2. How do early childhood education systems differ around the world?
	Indicator B3. Who is expected to graduate from upper secondary education?
	Indicator B4. Who is expected to enter tertiary education?
	Indicator B5. How many students complete tertiary education?
	Indicator B6. What is the profile of internationally mobile students?
Financial resources invested in education	Indicator C1. How much is spent per student on educational institutions?
	Indicator C2. What proportion of national output is spent on educational institutions?
	Indicator C3. How much public and private investment in educational institutions is there?
	Indicator C4. What is the total public spending on education?
	Indicator C5. How much do tertiary students pay and what public support do they receive?
	Indicator C6. On what resources and services is education funding spent?
Teachers, the learning environment and the organization of schools	Indicator D3. How much are teachers and school heads paid?
	Indicator D4. How much time do teachers and school heads spend teaching and working?
	Indicator D6. What are the pathways to becoming a teacher and a school head?
	Indicator D7. How extensive are professional development activities for teachers and school heads?
	Indicator D8. What is the profile of academic staff and what is the student-academic staff ratio?

Source: Compiled by author based on Education at a Glance (2022).

The level of education for the OECD is noteworthy from the point of view of employers who perceive qualifications as proof of skills and knowledge. It is also understood that the higher the level of education, the higher the social commitment and the better the employment and income rates. In the indicators associated with the performance of educational institutions and the impact of learning, the relationship between education and the labor market is key.

With respect to access to education, participation and progress, although the indicators are mostly from higher education, early childhood education is also considered because of the benefits to children's cognitive development, emotional development and well-being, and as the report also notes, because children who learn well at an early age are more likely to do well when they grow up. In regard to upper secondary education, the OECD states that enrollment rates have been rising because the skills acquired are increasingly in demand in the labor market.

The chapter on resources is justified by the need to know how, where and which economic resources are allocated to education. It is assumed that an increase in the resources allocated to education is of economic benefit to societies insofar as the training of their citizens has an impact on the system of production.

Finally, with respect to the indicators about teachers, it is considered that the working conditions of teachers and school principals are relevant in attracting, developing and retaining them in the educational system. This demonstrates a point made at the beginning of this article: the importance of teachers for the proper functioning of educational systems and student achievement, and the dissemination of this idea by supranational educational policies, especially those of the OECD.

## **European Union: Education and Training Monitor (2021)**

While there are several publications on specific educational topics by Eurydice (on the teaching profession, early childhood education or equity, among others), the European Commission periodically prepares its *Education and Training Monitor* (2021), which reports on the evolution of education systems and global data on them. The data are used to monitor the progress countries have made toward the goals proposed within the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and

training with a view to the European Education Area 2025 and beyond (2021-2030). Although country-specific reports are available, this article will refer to the general report.

The following table (Table II) shows the indicators organized by chapter in the report.

The indicators are divided into three chapters:

- Education and well-being.
- Seven EU-level targets towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021- 2030).
- Investment and quality of spending on education and training.

Student well-being is defined as "a general state of mental and physical health, strength, resilience and fitness that enables them to perform well

**TABLE II.** Education and Training Monitor Report Indicators (2021)

CHAPTER	INDICATOR
Education and well-being	What we know about well-being before COVID-19: an analysis of data from PISA 2018 and TIMSS 2019.
	Students' perspective: PISA data on student feelings and bullying
	Teachers' perspective and the role of school governance in shaping well-being
Seven EU-level targets towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030)	Underachievement in basic skills
	Low achieving eight graders in digital skills
	Participation in early childhood education and care
	Early leavers from education and training
	Tertiary level attainment
	Work-based learning
	Adult learning
Investment and quality of expenditure in education and training	Total expenditure on education and training
	Public expenditure on education and training
	Public expenditure by education sector and category
	Financing education and training in the context of COVID-19
	The Recovery and Resilience Facility

Source: Compiled by the authors based on the Education and Training Monitor (2021).

in school and in their personal lives" (European Commission, 2021, p.11). This well-being is decisive to their development in the education system. The European Commission addresses student well-being by collecting data before the global pandemic of COVID-19 and afterwards. The indicators considered in this section are taken from non-EU sources such as PISA (OECD) and TIMSS (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement) data. PISA is a reference source for the EU in terms of student achievement in competencies. It should be recalled that the EU and the OECD share the competency-based approach to education. The second chapter, *Seven EU-level targets towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030)*, considers EU targets and their level of achievement by countries. Raising performance in selected skills (language, mathematics, science and digital) is one of the key challenges for the EU. Each country is scored based on data taken from PISA. Improving performance in these skills is seen as a prerequisite for active participation in society as well as for enhancing personal and professional opportunities.

Improving enrollment in early childhood education is also a goal for the EU. This target is justified by the OECD's approach, which argues for the importance for social and emotional well-being of reducing the likelihood of early dropout and its contribution to good performance and better jobs. The EU member states' concern to reduce early school dropout is clear. Their aim is to ensure that all students can develop their potential, since citizens who do not acquire basic training suffer more from disruptions in the labor market. The percentage of students in tertiary education is an indicator that is explained by its impact on the construction of inclusive and progressive societies, without forgetting the more personal side of the social and economic benefits to those who choose to pursue degrees in higher education. Work-based learning is seen as beneficial because it enables the acquisition of job skills that help the student transition to the labor market and are highly valued by employers.

Finally, adult learning is necessary for a society undergoing technological and ecological transformation and multiple changes associated with the new times.

In the chapter on financial resources, emphasis is placed on the importance of having enough resources available to keep education systems running and ensure equal opportunities. Emphasis is placed on increasing attention to the effectiveness and efficiency of education system resources and the impact of the resources invested.

## Conclusions

This section on conclusions begins by laying out the similarities and differences observed in the reports presented by the OECD and the EU. This will reveal their where they stand through the indicators they offer and the evidence they consider should be a source of political decision-making. Accordingly, inferences can then be made about the approaches behind them and the conceptions on which they are based.

The headings that structure both publications and articulate their respective indicators are different, except for the one on investment and spending on education, to which both the OECD and the European Commission give great weight. Both organizations are cognizant of the importance of having global and comparative data on education spending and investment to provide information for making policy decisions in this regard. Educational investment is a *sine qua non* condition for the development and functioning of a country's education system.

However, while the OECD gives an overview of the education system without assessing achievements on pre-set goals, the European Commission makes its educational objectives the backbone for the construction of the report. This approach clearly shows that political integration of Europe is now definitely also based on a rapprochement of its education systems. Harmonizing education within the framework of the European Union stopped being taboo ever since the beginning of the 21st century, when the EU's strategic frameworks for educational action were established and designed by decade (2000-2010, 2010-2020, etc.). The report thus plays a decisive role in assessing, with evidence, the progress made on the targets set for all the educational systems in the Union.

Among the divergences between the two publications, one salient aspect considered in the *Education Monitor* (EU) is the well-being of students and other educational actors, which, although mostly taken from PISA, is not analyzed in "*Education at a Glance*" (OECD), which does not address the students' own perceptions. There are also differences in how higher education is treated, since, as stated above, the OECD takes it as one of its main topics, while the *Education and Training Monitor* report considers it as being at the same level as any other.

Many indicators are justified in both organizations by their repercussions on employability or by their impact on the preparation of future workers, thus considering the education system as somehow dependent

on the productive economic system and answerable to the labor market. However, the OECD underscores this economics-oriented discourse much more sharply.

The analysis presented warrants thorough discussion of the findings. It is telling that when the international organizations refer to *evidence*, they do so mainly by referring to quantitative data and final results.

This merits two reflections. The first is that by understanding evidence to mean only quantitatively measurable aspects, it leaves out evidence that can only be measured with qualitative techniques, such as the processes that give rise to the results and contextual elements that are difficult to detect. In this sense, Tiana (2010) rightly states that although international assessments yield very relevant information for countries, they sometimes have limited explanatory power due to the lack of contextualization of the data, which require combining them with other types of analysis.

This leads to the second reflection, which has to do with the artificiality with which some indicators are sometimes "constructed". The algorithm that defines some of them, based on categories that are themselves debatable, or the decisions on how to conceptualize them (of which adult education rates or early school dropout rates are prime examples) largely determine the results. In other words, different conceptualizations of these indicators can provide very different data. This implicitly implies the possibility of "altering" or "perverting" the original meaning of a result depending on how we define the conceptualization of the data through which we intend to show it.

On the other hand, apart from the criticism that indicators are only quantitative, it is worth reflecting on the ones that are most important. It has become evident that the economic element is very present in what is constructed as evidence for decision-making in education. However, since this is a radical matter of the welfare state and in view of an inalienable fundamental right as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, some of the concepts used as "evidence" are almost detrimental to an approach to education based on Human Dignity.

In any case, if evidence is only quantitative, it should never be taken as valid, universal knowledge that in education justifies any political action, because the risk of the "dictatorship of numbers" can lead to decisions that fit within the logical framework of quantitative efficiency, but not within the framework of a humanistic vision. To give an example, the

measurement of the effectiveness of higher education studies in a given degree in a given population cannot be left only to a criterion of economic viability, because there are elements for some university studies that, beyond being "profitable" or not, represent a value in and of themselves as part of the cultural heritage of the species that must continue to be preserved and transmitted. In the same way, in rural contexts, the effectiveness or otherwise of a road cannot be measured only in terms of its costs, but also in terms of the services it offers (beyond its profitability), due to the right of all people to have access to certain services.

Evidence-based policies should look much more closely at processes and contexts. In fact, humanistic educational perspectives focus much more on processes than on outcomes, but it is logical that it is more complex to do so in "macro" comparisons than in small educational ecosystems.

Be that as it may, evidence-based policy also perpetuates a hegemony of quantitative research, which in the social sciences ought not exclude more qualitative approaches. If applied, for example, to the evidence provided to address teacher-related issues, the conclusions from the aggregate data often preclude a careful look at the role of many teachers whose working conditions are conditioned by contextual variables. This is something that cannot be analyzed by policymaking based on quantitative evidence.

In short, international organizations, as clear advocates of these "macro" types of proposals based on quantitative evidence, should work in greater depth on the complementarity of these data and promote "micro" case studies and analyses of good practices. This would undoubtedly make the evidence in fields such as education much more powerful.

## References

- Calero, J., & Choi, A. (2012). La evaluación como instrumento de política educativa. *Presupuesto y gasto público*, (67), 29-41.
- Comisión Europea. (2006). *Comunicación de la Comisión al Consejo y al Parlamento Europeo Eficiencia y equidad en los sistemas europeos de educación y formación*. COM (2006) 481 final.
- Comisión Europea. (2021). *Education and Training Monitor 2021. Education and well-being*. Publications Office of the European Union

- Comisión Europea. (n.d). Education and training statistics. <https://education.ec.europa.eu/resources-and-tools/education-and-training-statistics>
- Consejo Ejecutivo UNESCO. (2016). Estrategia integral para el Programa MOST. UNESCO.
- Consejo Europeo. (2002). Resolución del Consejo, de 27 de junio de 2002, sobre la educación permanente. *Diario Oficial de la Unión Europea*, serie C, n° 163, 9 de julio de 2002, p. 1-3.
- Consejo Europeo. (2009). Conclusiones del Consejo de 12 de mayo de 2009 sobre un marco estratégico para la cooperación europea en el ámbito de la educación y la formación («ET 2020»). *Diario Oficial de la Unión Europea*, serie C, n°119, 28 de mayo de 2009, p.2-10.
- Consejo Europeo. (2021). Resolución del Consejo relativa a un marco estratégico para la cooperación europea en el ámbito de la educación y la formación con miras al Espacio Europeo de Educación y más allá (2021-2030). *Diario oficial de la Unión Europea*, serie C, n°66, 26 de febrero de 2021, p. 1-21
- Dave, R. H. (1975). *Reflections on lifelong education and the school*. UNESCO Institute for Education Hamburgo.
- Delors, J. (1996). *La educación encierra un tesoro*. UNESCO.
- Diestro Fernández, A., & Valle López, J. (2015). Towards a European Supranational Policy of Education based on the European Dimension on Education. *Bordón. Revista de Pedagogía*, 67(1), 101–116. <https://recyt.fecyt.es/index.php/BORDON/article/view/Bordon.2015.67107>
- EIPPEE. (2011). *EIPPEE Project 2011-2013*. <http://www.eippee.eu/cms/Default.aspx?tabid=3318>
- Eurydice. (2017). *Support mechanisms for evidence-based policy-making in education*. Publications Office of the European Union. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2797/575942>.
- Faure, E., Herrera, F., Kaddoura, A-R., Lopes, H., Petrovski, A. V., Rahnema, M. & Ward F. Ch. (1973). *Aprender a ser. La educación del futuro*. Alianza Editorial / UNESCO.
- Kallen, D., & Bengtsson, J. (1973). *Recurrent Education: a strategy for lifelong learning*. OCDE.
- Lengrand, P. (1970). *An introduction to Lifelong Education*. UNESCO
- Ley Orgánica 8/2013, de 9 de diciembre, para la mejora de la calidad educativa. *Boletín Oficial del Estado*, núm. 295, de 10 de diciembre de 2013, pp. 97858 a 97921.

- Ley Orgánica 3/2020, de 29 de diciembre, por la que se modifica la Ley Orgánica 2/2006, de 3 de mayo, de Educación. *Boletín Oficial del Estado*, núm.340, de 30 de diciembre de 2020, pp. 122868 a 122953
- Lynch, J. (1977). *Lifelong education and the preparation of educational personnel*. UNESCO Institute for Education
- Matarranz, M., & Pérez Roldán, T. (2016). ¿Política educativa supranacional o educación supranacional? El debate sobre el objeto de estudio de un área emergente de conocimiento. *Revista Española De Educación Comparada*, (28), 91–107. <https://doi.org/10.5944/reec.28.2016.17034>
- Matarranz, M., Valle, J. M., & Manso, J. (2020). Después del 2020... Hacia un Espacio Europeo de Educación en 2025. *Revista Española De Educación Comparada*, (36), 98–128. <https://doi.org/10.5944/reec.36.2020.27040>
- OCDE. (2007). *Evidence in Education: Linking Research and Policy*. OECD Publishing
- OCDE. (2021). *OECD Skills Outlook 2021: Learning for Life*. OECD Publishing
- OCDE. (2022). *Education at a Glance 2022: OECD Indicators*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/3197152b-en>.
- OCDE. (n.d). *OCDE. Educación. Measuring outcomes*. <https://www.oecd.org/education/>
- Parcerisa, L., & Verger, A. (2016). Rendición de cuentas y política educativa: Una revisión de la evidencia internacional y futuros retos para la investigación. *Profesorado. Revista de Curriculum y Formación del Profesorado*, 20 (3), 15-51. <https://recyt.fecyt.es/index.php/profesorado/article/view/54589>.
- Parlamento Europeo & Consejo Europeo (2006). Recomendación del Parlamento Europeo y del Consejo, de 18 de diciembre de 2006, sobre las competencias clave para el aprendizaje permanente. *Diario Oficial de la Unión Europea*, serie L, n° 394, 30 de diciembre de 2006, p.10-18.
- Ríos González, F. (2006). Tendencias del aprendizaje permanente en el espacio europeo. *Cuestiones Pedagógicas*, (18), 271-284. <https://revistascientificas.us.es/index.php/Cuestiones-Pedagogicas/article/view/10060>.
- Thoilliez, B. (2017). Evidencias y conocimiento pedagógico. Limitaciones para el desarrollo profesional docente. En H. Monarca y B. Thoilliez (coord.). *La profesionalización docente: debates y propuestas* (pp. 53-59).

- Síntesis Tiana, A. (2010). En búsqueda de la explicación de los resultados educativos: posibilidades y limitaciones de los estudios internacionales de evaluación. *Gestión y análisis de políticas públicas*, 35-66.
- UNESCO. (2016). *Educación 2030 Declaración de Incheon y Marco de Acción: hacia una educación inclusiva y equitativa de calidad y un aprendizaje a lo largo de la vida para todos*. UNESCO.
- UNESCO. (2020). *El enfoque de Aprendizaje a lo Largo de Toda la Vida: Implicaciones para la política educativa en América Latina y el Caribe*. UNESCO
- UNESCO. (2022a). *Reimaginar juntos nuestros futuros: un nuevo contrato social para la educación*. UNESCO.
- UNESCO. (2022b). *Reinventando la educación: la evaluación internacional de la educación basada en la ciencia y la evidencia: resumen para los responsables de la toma de decisiones (RTD)*. UNESCO. Instituto Mahatma Gandhi de Educación para la Paz y el Desarrollo Sostenible
- UNESCO. (n.d) *Institute for Lifelong Learning*. <https://uil.unesco.org/>
- Valle, J. M. (2012). La política educativa supranacional: un nuevo campo de conocimiento para abordar las políticas educativas en un mundo globalizado. *Revista Española de Educación Comparada*, 20, 109-144. <https://doi.org/10.5944/reec.20.2012.7595>
- Valle, J. M. (2013). Supranational Education: a new field of knowledge to address educational policies in a global world. *Journal of Supranational Policies of Polices of Education*, 1, 7-30. <https://revistas.uam.es/jospoe/article/view/5616>
- Valle, J. M. (2015). Las políticas educativas en tiempos de globalización: la educación supranacional. *Bordón. Revista De Pedagogía*, 67(1), 11–21. <https://recyt.fecyt.es/index.php/BORDON/article/view/Bordon.2015.67101>
- Valle, J. M. (2018). El cambio curricular: Las Competencias Clave para el Aprendizaje Permanente, *Cuadernos de Pedagogía*, 488.

**Contact address:** Javier M. Valle López. Universidad Autónoma de Madrid. Facultad de Formación de Profesorado y Educación. Departamento de Pedagogía. C/ Tomás y Valiente, nº3, Dcho I-316. 28049, Madrid, e-mail: [jm.valle@uam.es](mailto:jm.valle@uam.es)