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governing education: international organisations, populism and the pandemic

Jenny Ozga

This paper looks at the work of International Organisations (IOs) in governing education, focusing on the work that they do in the preparation and promotion of data-based knowledge that supports the global adoption of standardised practices of assessment, regulation and learning. These governing practices reflect the contemporary interdependency and interaction of governing and knowledge. As governing has changed to become less nationally bounded, and more networked and transnational, so too has knowledge changed. Epistemic governance has emerged as a governing form that is linked directly to the recent growth of knowledge technologies, especially those that enable rapid movement and transfer of information, as well as its presentation as an objective and reliable guide to best practice. Epistemic governance also promotes the growth of knowledge brokering, by agencies such as IOs, that is needed to translate complex evidence into policy advice. This paper considers the knowledge work of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), looking at how its advice has changed over time, and at the recent governing strategy of combining data-based work with persuasive strategies of incorporation of national actors into the project of global modernisation and economisation of education. Finally, the paper asks if, following the COVID-19 pandemic, evidence of growing inequalities, along with a decline of trust in expertise and the related rise of right-wing populism threatens the position of IOs as knowledge brokers par excellence.

Keywords: depoliticisation, epistemic governance, international organisations, knowledge, populism

Epistemic Governance

In exploring how International Organisations (IOs) use knowledge to govern education, this paper draws on research that, over time, identifies changes in governing and changes in knowledge, and analyses their interdependencies. The first phase of research, in the early 2000s, charted a shift in governing towards processes and practices, involving agents and interests, working transnationally, across sectors and cultures, that displaced nationally bounded, hierarchically organized educational bureaucracies. A related shift away from traditional forms of expertise saw the growth of mobile, data-based knowledge and associated technologies to support co-ordination across transnational spaces. In this period, IOs became significant actors in generating data-based comparative performance assessments as a key governing resource. Later research explored accountability and performance regimes, the growth of transnational data infrastructures, and the increasing presence of private actors and knowledge brokers in governing education (Fenwick et al., 2014; Grek & Lindgren, 2015; Ozga et al., 2011).

In the wider field of global public policy, these developments are understood as indicators of the

growth of epistemic governance (Alasuutari & Qadir, 2019), that is, governing that works by shaping public perceptions of what a problem is and how it may be addressed, through promoting selected knowledge paradigms, and through defining what is trustworthy, reliable evidence. Quantitative data is a key resource in this governing form, it provides the evidence that frames global public policy concerns, and it is accorded legitimacy by policy actors that is denied to other forms of knowledge. Epistemic infrastructures construct policy choices (Tichenor et al., 2022). These infrastructures combine quantification with the increasing economisation of education, a development that follows, first, from the increasing authority accorded to economists in selecting priorities in education policy, second from the expansion of instrumental approaches to education, and third from the growth in influence of IOs such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank whose primary concerns are economic growth (Grek, 2024). Increased conformity and homogeneity in education provision is promoted by these IOs, creating a cognitive consensus (Grundmann, 2018) or structured agenda for education around models that are claimed to be effective, efficient, and equitable.

International Organisations

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) is the most influential IO in the policy field of education. It works through transnational policy diffusion, shaping education worldwide. That influence is most evident in its Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), running every three years since 2000, and taken as reliable evidence of how 15-year-olds can use school learning in life. Its comparative data are used to benchmark national performance (Elfert & Ydesen, 2023), and media reporting of 'winners and losers' has not diminished in the quarter-century since the first assessments; the 2025 results have rocked European education powerhouses (Henley et al., 2026). Other IOs with strong influence on education include the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), whose Education for All (EFA) and Sustainable Development Goals express collective commitments to principles of access and equity, and the World Bank, which, through policy instruments such as the Systems Approach for Better Education Results (SABER), steers national processes of educational development through the insertion of accountability mechanisms (Grek, 2024). The PISA 2018 assessment of global competence promotes the idea of a measurable and shared level of capacity and orientation to learning worldwide, regardless of differences in context. As Gardinier (2021, p. 137) demonstrates, this framing promotes the idea of global learners as "autonomous individuals who can differentiate themselves from their social identities", the imagined ideal learner is "future-oriented, socially mature, goal-oriented, and extremely self-aware" (p. 138). The OECD's work involves 'teaching' national actors to collaborate in knowledge production and learning processes, and thus to see themselves as located in a global policy space, engaged in a modernization project, making the best use of expert knowledge (Grek & Ydesen, 2021).

IOs, including the OECD, present themselves as research-driven, and skillfully deploy narratives from different traditions of enquiry, adjusting their self-presentation to suit their audiences. They offer one-stop evidence shops and constantly recalibrate their legitimacy, becoming part of the landscape of government (Bandola-Gill, 2021), thus further reducing the distance between knowledge production and policy use. The OECD promotes itself, then, as an expert knowledge-based organisation (KBO), sufficiently distanced from context to be dispassionate and objective. Examination of its history shows its increasing transnational influence and the changing production of knowledge and expertise within the organisation from the 1960s to contemporary times, reflecting a shift from independent research activity to the advocacy of standardized policies in

education globally. Through a longitudinal study, Rautalin et al. (2021) show how OECD's Economic Surveys shift in tone and content to become more prescriptive. As the importance of its independent research activity and its referencing of academic literature declined, research-based knowledge became a backdrop to the 'persuasive talk' that foregrounds more directive advice and policy steering. A further, parallel development is the growing disconnection between evidence collected in the reviews and the policy advice offered.

Knowledge brokering is a key element in the repertoire of IOs (Baek & Steiner-Khamsi, 2024; Elfert & Ydesen, 2023; Smith et al., 2024). They are knowledge brokers par excellence, they are key players in this arena, presenting themselves as authoritative sources of epistemic capital and capacity-building knowledge, as sources of information about the performance of competitors, and as offering evidence to national governments that can justify the pursuit of domestic agendas. Once again, we can see how IOs tailor their approaches to their audiences. The OECD and the World Bank, which both prioritise economic growth, have used concrete indicators to shape outcomes across the globe. UNESCO, by contrast, seeks legitimacy through norm-setting and rights-based frameworks, and—perhaps in consequence—its influence has waned by comparison with the OECD and the World Bank (Elfert & Ydesen, 2023).

The very substantial literature on the tense relationship between knowledge, expertise and policy making across a range of policy fields (see, for example, Grundmann, 2018; Stone, 2021), and in a range of contexts, identifies the steadily increasing control of knowledge production processes, not only in IOs but also in the academy (Craft & Howlett, 2013). As independent knowledge production becomes increasingly aligned with the work of IOs and Knowledge Brokering Organisations and as the governing of research becomes more direct, steering through incentivization, as well as definition of appropriate research topics, replaces curiosity and investigator choice. Alternative sources of knowledge are increasingly marginalized or dismissed as politically motivated. IOs claim to deal in objective and robust evidence, and to be moving education away from ideologically driven conflict that, they claim, has hampered progress in the past. This process of depoliticisation seeks to eliminate debates about values and purposes in education, further eroding forms of knowledge that do not lend themselves easily to quantification.

Depoliticisation

Leaving ideologically driven conflicts behind is encouraged by IOs in their constant stress on the objectivity of their knowledge production processes. Consequently, the dominant narrative of education policymaking, promoted by IOs in recent years, has been one in which evidence-based policy agendas produce objective, scientific solutions to shared policy problems, since the 1980s defined primarily in economic terms. IOs enrol nation-states in this governing project so that the growing economisation of education globally has effects on culture and politics (Robertson & Dale, 2015).

The transformation of the nature of the political is key to the growing influence of IOs, as education is inherently a site of political conflict that follows from the demands on it to fulfil multiple competing functions summarized here briefly as *economic*, that is, servicing the economy, *social*, that is the allocation of opportunities and management of inequalities, and *cultural*—that is, building (shared) identities and creating citizens (Ozga, 2000). These requirements are very obviously in tension with one another, struggles over competing economic, political and social demands are generated by the need to solve persistent problems within capitalism: preparation of the workforce,

disciplining identities to ensure social order and cohesion, and legitimizing social ordering despite the continued existence of inequalities. Previously, national narratives were often devised to help manage the tensions between these imperatives, and education played a more or less central role in that management. But since education has been so extensively defined in global economic terms, how can we explain the dominance of the post-ideological education policy consensus, given evidence of reduced social mobility and increasing economic inequality in countries as politically and economically diverse as Singapore, the USA, Israel, Australia, Sweden, Denmark, Japan and Germany?

The concept of depoliticisation helps to explain the dominance of a structured, decontextualised agenda for education despite the nation-state's neglect of education's function of maintaining a degree of social harmony or inclusion, while also struggling to sustain and promote a coherent account of national identity, and thus maintain legitimacy. Depoliticisation is the process through which policy is cleansed of politics. It is the reverse side of the coin of politicisation (Louis & Maertens, 2021), as it is a highly politicised governing strategy. Through processes of depoliticisation, social issues are pushed away from politics and into "the realm of fate or necessity" (Hay, 2007, as cited in Wood & Flinders, 2014, p. 154). Policy making processes are thus insulated from democratic pressures and delegated to technocratic agencies, such as IOs. Spaces for the articulation and celebration of dissensus, that is, for politics, are closed. Depoliticisation is strongly associated with technocracy, with identification of single policy goals, and one best way of achieving them, so alternatives are silenced, and societal factors are eliminated, along with public debates around previously contentious issues. There is an obvious alignment between ideas of depoliticization and the conceptualisation of economically driven, data-based epistemic infrastructures that frame problems and solutions, discussed earlier.

Re-politicisation? Inequalities, the COVID-19 Pandemic and Populism

However, it may be that these depoliticised epistemic infrastructures are encountering new challenges, in what some have called a post neo-liberal formation, or post-truth regime (Fuller, 2018) characterised by erosion of trust in expertise and the consequent breakdown of technocratic consensus. IOs are redefining their focus and seeking alternative grounds for claims to authority and legitimacy (Steiner-Khamsi, 2025), including a focus on generating knowledge about well-being, sustainability and resilience. For example, the OECD's *How's Life?* measures the economy of well-being using more than 80 indicators covering current well-being outcomes, inequalities, and resources for future well-being, social and individual flourishing (OECD, 2024). Changes in the knowledge-brokering activities of IOs have been noted, that include a shift from reliance on objective data alone towards work that attempts to ensure consensus and engagement (Grek, 2024).

These recent developments suggest challenges to the hegemony of IOs, and, indeed, some concerns within IOs themselves that the dominance of the economic in education and other policy fields has produced tensions that require some rebalancing of priorities. These tensions were highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic, where, in many Western European contexts, inequalities became more evident and deeper. The pandemic's effects on education provision both highlighted and deepened inequalities, raising some public expectations of radical compensatory actions by nation states. Indeed, some IOs were quick to advise policy makers that there was a need for education recovery planning that re-examined assumptions about education priorities (UNESCO, UNICEF, & World Bank, 2020). Established global agendas for reform were challenged by demands to better recognise the impact of poverty and poor mental health, and to enable learner and institutional resilience, so

that advice from, for example, the OECD, encouraged governments to consider fundamental change in moving to "a better normal" (OECD, 2020, Executive summary, para. 1).

The advice on planning for education recovery produced by IOs foregrounded debates about purposes and priorities in education, including the extent to which local, national, contextualised needs and priorities needed to be identified and pursued. It seemed briefly possible that the extent of the crisis might produce political demands for fundamental change. Yet, despite evidence of the continuing devastating impact of COVID-19 on children, young people, and their teachers, a return to 'normal' without significant change is underway, but with the addition of references to, and measurements of, resilience and well-being. There is little debate about priorities, or about the importance of local, contextualised knowledge in planning for recovery, despite evidence from the pandemic experience that such knowledge was vital in managing the crisis and in effectively combatting inequalities of access to educational resources (Moss et al., 2021). Instead, the pandemic has been used as a lever to further install technological solutionism as the solution to global inequalities in access to and performance in education (Teräs et al., 2020), and the expansion of measurement into previously neglected areas. That expansion may generate more open, flexible and negotiated forms of measurement, but it may also operate to generate further legitimation of the authority of IOs and their knowledge brokers.

A more substantial challenge may follow from the severe erosion of material conditions of life apparent in the global north and exacerbated in the global south. Increasing economic difference among groups, linked to feelings of exclusion and vulnerability are factors in explaining the growth of support for right wing populist political parties. Populism asserts a fundamental opposition, indeed deep antagonism, between the people and the elite (Katsambekis, 2017) and further claims that the main aim of politics is to respect and defend popular sovereignty (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018). IOs, with their populations of experts, are thus classified as elitist organisations, importing ideas and practices from other cultures, and diminishing popular and national sovereignty.

The legitimacy of IOs is further challenged by populist arguments that identify knowledge and expertise as elitist, that advantages some groups and excludes others. Right wing populist parties ask questions about whose interests are served by IOs, what authority they have, who works for them, and what they stand for. Recent scholarship identifies the difficulty of defining populism and reveals the variety of educational traditions and patterns of provision in countries where populist parties are influential (Editorial Team, 2024; Neumann & Rudnicki, 2025). It is possible to identify some shared, but sometimes contradictory policy preferences among populist parties—for example, in asserting the primacy of a supposedly dominant Christian culture, in asserting that educational outcomes are connected to individual will power and effort, in prioritising a national language, values and religion (Gruber & Schnell, n.d.). More specifically there is evidence of policies that favour selection and tracking by ability, greater differentiation, and more private provision. Strong discipline and nostalgic curriculum content indicate cultural conservatism or restorationism, but these are sometimes aligned with neo-liberal economic policies (Giudici et al., 2025; Nestore & Robertson, 2022).

Populist attitudes to IOs in education have not yet received much attention, but the stress on schooling as a site of national identity formation does look likely to generate tensions with OECD's model of the global, decontextualised learner, offering, in populist ideology a threat to national values. As the Editorial Team (2024) argue in an earlier edition of this journal, we need much more information about far-right populism's attitudes to, and connections with, IOs, and about how IOs

are responding to criticisms of their elitism and decontextualised expertise. Both developments have significant implications for the governance of education, for knowledge producers and for the knowledge-based resources that will be selected by policy makers.

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jenny ozga

Jenny Ozga (https://www.education.ox.ac.uk/person/jenny-ozga/) is Professor Emeritus of the Sociology of Education in the Department of Education, the University of Oxford. She works on education policy, governing and knowledge, and is currently re-analysing data collected on funded projects on knowledge and policy in education in the UK from the 1940s to contemporary times.