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measuring for whom? a decolonial perspective on the OECD's global comparative regime in education

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This article critically examines the OECD's global comparative regime in education through a decolonial lens, interrogating the epistemic and political consequences of its expanding governance reach into Latin America. Notably, though education—and the production of educational data—was never part of the OECD's mandate, it has become one of the OECD's most visible areas of activity since the launch of PISA in the 2000s. The OECD Directorate for Education and Skills has developed governance mechanisms with a focus on the knowledge, experience, and perspectives of the core regions of the world-system. These are often at odds with those living under different conditions in the periphery of the modern/colonial world system, the Global South. Drawing on Viola's (2020) institutional and epistemic closure, the analysis highlights how the OECD's 'Paris Consensus on Education' reproduces a developmentalist, Northern lens that positions Latin American member states as perpetually 'catching up' within a linear, Eurocentric temporality. Through examination of the OECD's internal stratification between historical and peripheral members, the article demonstrates that membership expansion does not democratise the OECD's epistemic foundations but instead reproduces internal stratification. Engaging with Southern theory and decolonial critique, the article challenges the presumed universality of the OECD's measurement regime by asking: measuring for whom? This article argues that the OECD's posturing as a neutral, technocratic epistemic authority obscures deeper colonial continuities and that the OECD's governance mechanisms systematically preclude onto-epistemic plurality, rendering invisible alternative educational paradigms oriented towards collective well-being, cultural affirmation, and transformative social change rather than economic utility and neoliberal subjectification.

Keywords: benchmarking, decolonial education, epistemic justice, global education governance, OECD

The governance of education in the Global South has long been shaped by international organisations (IOs), often in ways that reinforce historical patterns of *epistemic injustice* (see Bhambra, 2021). From the colonial imposition of schooling systems to the contemporary dominance of standardised assessments and data-driven policymaking, education in the Global South has long been institutionalised under the purview and standard-setting of international actors. These colonial continuities are generally not acknowledged or addressed by IOs in the field of education policy (Sriprakash, 2023; Sriprakash et al., 2020). Education's role in the modernisation of societies has also meant that formal, institutionalised education in the Global South has long been a site of epistemic violence, erasure, and resistance (see Cupples & Grosfoguel, 2018).

In Latin America, institutional education was part of a civilisational, hegemonic project of the whitened elites. Today, education continues to largely be characterised by assimilationist policies

and neglect towards Indigenous and Black peoples; as such, education remains a site of onto-epistemic struggle. We now speak about decoloniality (Escobar, 2010; Quijano, 2007, 2014; Walsh, 2008) to denounce these continuities. Emancipatory, transformative education paradigms have been a form to redress these harms. These education paradigms are often small in scale, if not in aspiration. Decolonial interculturality seeks repair by centring indigenous ontologies, language, and embodied knowledge. *Educación popular* seeks to be an emancipatory practice; to germinate critical, decolonial thinking; to challenge power.

These education paradigms model a resistance to totalising, liberal education models that are institutionalised and made global through IOs such as the OECD and UNESCO. These IOs are often portrayed in contrast to each other: as the OECD insists on its neutrality, UNESCO has long been an explicitly normative, political institution. Despite this apparent divergence, both share a liberal character that fundamentally shapes their governance paradigms. From a *Southern Lens* (see Boatcă, 2021), liberalism's mutually constitutive relationship to both modernity and capitalism makes it part of the same system of dispossession as coloniality (see Povinelli, 2016, 2021). While UNESCO has long been characterised by its "humanistic-idealistic worldview" (Elfert & Ydesen, 2023, p. 25), the OECD's education governance is, in many ways, antithetical to conceptualisations of education that were rooted in decolonial and anti-colonial struggles, emancipatory pedagogies, and autonomous and/or Indigenous social and political movements.

Here, I focus on the OECD specifically because of its standing as the global measurer of education par excellence, its longstanding status as the 'Club of the Rich'[1] and its interest in continuing to expand its membership towards Latin America, following the initial introduction of Mexico in 1994 as a member. I focus on the trajectory of the OECD from the 2000s onwards, during which the OECD began employing "comparative indicators of good governance" (Alawattage & Elshihry, 2017, p. 170).

My central concern with the OECD is its homogenisation –how it narrows the possibilities to sustain alternatives to its economistic and instrumental education paradigm, even as it has undergone a 'humanitarian turn' (Xiaomin & Auld, 2020) from 2011 onwards. The OECD justifies this flattening with the promise of economic growth (see Schmelzer, 2016) and, for its Southern members, the promise of finally 'catching-up'.

This research adopts Latin American critical theory—specifically decolonial thought—as its meta-theoretical framing, enabling a critical counter to the OECD's epistemic authority grounded in claims of techno-scientific objectivity. Here, I draw from decolonial thought to conceptualise the OECD's education governance as a *Northern lens*, drawing on Boatcă's (2021) definition: "linear accounts of Western capitalist modernity and its achievements […] centred on the perspective and experience of core regions of the world-system" (Boatcă, 2021, p. 1984). I posit that the OECD's governance mechanisms privilege onto-epistemic formations of the Global North, and that this cannot be remedied through representation or liberal inclusion alone.

Central to this framework is Quijano's (2000) coloniality of power: the global matrix of power arising from the colonisation of the Americas, which introduced racial hierarchisation and, together with capitalism and Eurocentrism, characterises the *modern world system* (see Wallerstein, 2011). Escobar (2018, p. 94) asserts that there is no modernity without coloniality, tracing how this hierarchisation underpinned 'civilising' projects under colonial rule and subsequent 'modernisation' and 'development' agendas across the Global South. These colonial continuities are often *wilfully*

ignored (see Alcoff, 2007) in contemporary analyses of global governance or the international system.

Here, I engage Law's (2015) 'One-World World' doctrine, arguing that ontological issues in North-South encounters are frequently reduced to epistemological differences within a shared, all-encompassing reality rather than acknowledged as distinct *reals*. This translation neglects the incommensurability of heterogeneous knowledges, instead incorporating difference into the *liberal script* (see Börzel & Zürn, 2020) through principles of sameness. As Blaney and Tickner (2017, p. 298) contend, efforts to undo the One-World World begin by acknowledging difference as something that cannot be included.

Finally, Alawattage and Elshihry's (2017, p. 172) analysis of the OECD as an "epistemic institution, *par excellence*, of neoliberal global governance" illuminates how the Organisation's depoliticisation and decontextualisation reinforce neoliberal governmentality. Zürn (2018, p. 53) conceptualises the OECD as a politically assigned epistemic authority which institutionalises knowledge orders. The sheen of objectivity or neutrality of the OECD's comparison regime ultimately enforces a neoliberal governmentality in education governance —a central concern when considering the OECD's and its posturing in relation to the Global South, particularly as it aims to expand its membership towards Latin America.

The Paris Consensus on Education

The OECD has long been known as the 'Club of the Rich', its largely homogenous membership having been based on the rich, industrialised, 'like-minded' countries of the West. The addition to its membership of both Mexico (1994) and Chile (2010)—among other countries from the former Soviet bloc—was accompanied by the official narrative that the Organisation was becoming truly global, more inclusive, and more democratic. Now Costa Rica (2021) and Colombia (2020) have also joined the OECD; and Argentina, Peru, and Brazil are among six new candidates for accession.

Countries pursue OECD membership because it gives them a new international status—one seen as signalling greater economic attractiveness for foreign investment and a higher level of development relative to their region. This pursuit is closely tied to narratives of 'graduation' embedded in the Western development paradigm (Werkstetter Caravaca, 2025, p. 101). The OECD's expanding membership towards Latin America and other 'emerging economies' raises questions about the agency of its new, peripheral members and, in turn, about the role these new members play within the OECD. The OECD's awesome capacity to produce education data, and to package it so that it is applicable for education ministries both within and outside its membership, has become one of the primary selling points of the Organisation in the field of education. Yet education itself is rarely a priority in accession processes: trade and economic policies take precedence, and education is often excluded from the Accession Roadmap altogether.

A broker between the OECD and Mexico spoke about the neoliberal character of the OECD's comparison regime, naming it the *Paris Consensus on Education*, noting:

> the Paris Consensus is the set of beliefs, values, objectives that guided a growing international consensus on educational policy, focused on improving the learning of educational quality. To evaluate teachers that way, weakens their collective organisation, see? Student evaluation, teacher evaluation. Evaluation of the systems as

> a whole; use of data; use of evidence: this is the Paris Consensus. In the long run, it ended up disappointing me because I felt that it ended up being *very functional for the neoliberal order*. It was better to blame the union, blame the teachers, blame the school. (MEX-Broker, translation and emphasis my own)

This wording alludes to the Washington Consensus. This is no coincidence. The Paris Consensus on Education, as defined here, is the result of the OECD's techno-scientific activities in the field of global education governance: data-driven policy recommendations, and comparative assessments. This Consensus centres on the use of standardised assessments, accountability mechanisms, and evidence-based policymaking as drivers of education reform—all linked to the economisation of social policy. Whether as 'technocratic-educationalizing' (Bürgi, 2016, p. 161), or governance 'by indicators' (Grek & Ydesen, 2021), the OECD Directorate for Education and Skills since the 2000s has established a comparison regime in the global governance of education.

Benchmarking and comparative assessment imply an ordering and the implicit expectation to follow recommendations based on comparison is the exercise of epistemic authority. Epistemic authority demands legitimation, setting it apart from other forms of power such as coercion and force. These are normative practices that establish a standard –here the OECD 'average'– that indicates who is 'failing' and 'succeeding' and where you fall in that calculation matters. PISA is a global ranking after all. Practices of comparison are constitutive of social order in world politics, the consequence of which depend on the actors that produce comparative knowledge in particular policy fields. Indicators are not explicit about the theories that they represent (Davis et al., 2012, p. 72) and certainly not explicit about the onto-epistemic positions that inform them.

The OECD's emphasis on standardised learning outcomes and performance indicators has led to education rankings that frame Latin American countries as 'underperforming' relative to the OECD average. This reinforces a developmentalist perspective, where Mexico and Chile are perpetually in the 'past' and need to 'catch up' to the 'present' of high-income OECD members.

Already in 1982, Gabriel García Márquez spoke of the loneliness of Latin America as the inability of Europe to find a valid method with which to interpret and understand other geographies:

> It is understandable that they insist on measuring us with the same yardstick that they use for themselves, without remembering the ravages of life are not the same for all, and that the search for one's own identity is as hard and bloody for us [Latin Americans] as it has been for them [Europeans]. (García Márquez, 1982, translation my own)

This evocation by García Márquez resonates forty years on. The existing literature on the OECD speaks to the 'un-worlding' that takes place through its governance of education. This calls to mind Gorur and Addey's (2020) analysis of PISA-D in Cambodia, where they empirically demonstrate how the "carefully choreographed and orchestrated series of presentations, workshops, meetings, training programs, and statistical processes systematically shut down other choices" (Gorur & Addey, 2020, p. 107). Similarly, Robertson (2016) in her analysis of the OECD's Education GPS —a source for internationally comparable data on education based primarily on PISA results—writes: "[t]he fact that there are alternative routes to be taken, or indeed routes to be taken

that are not built into this system and which are perhaps more effective at delivering quality teaching and learning, is made invisible" (Robertson, 2016, p. 287).

The OECD's modernisation paradigm—the linear progress from underdeveloped towards the developed, modern nation-state—is particularly visible when the OECD is viewed from the margins. The OECD's insistence on its political or techno-scientific neutrality often ignores on-the-ground realities such as systemic inequalities, rural-urban divides, linguistic and cultural pluralisms, labour considerations —and there are no mechanisms in place for accountability.

The OECD developed the Paris Consensus on Education, as so succinctly surmised by one of my interview partners, through a system of international stratification that it continues to maintain, even as it appears to become an increasingly inclusive organisation with Southern membership. Ultimately, the OECD is not an "actor, arena or instrument" (Centeno, 2021) through which the modern duality of Global North and South can be opened up or countered, despite extending membership towards Latin America/the Global South and its stated aim to "transcend the old distinction between the 'North' and the 'South'" (OECD, 2012, p. 3).

The OECD's Internal Stratification and Epistemic Closure

Viola (2020b) in *The Closure of the International System* develops the Closure Thesis to understand the prevalence of hierarchical relations between actors within international institutions (Viola, 2020b, p. 3) and posits that "the obstinate coexistence of equality and inequality, and inclusion and exclusion, are neither incidental nor inconsistent but rather central dynamics of the international system and its institutions" (Viola, 2020b, p. 5). The Closure Thesis therefore counters deeply rooted assumptions in IR literature, i.e., the idea that greater inclusiveness promotes more equality (Viola, 2020b, p. 8) rather than increased stratification. The Closure Thesis counters the assumption that "equality and inequality are antagonistic" (Viola, 2020b, p. 8), posing instead that equality and inequality are mutually constitutive. Additionally, it challenges the assumption that international institutions provide global public goods, posing instead that they provide 'club goods', which are therefore, at times, exclusive to club members (Viola, 2020b, pp. 10–11).

Viola defines stratification as "a structure of social relations marked by differentiation into super- and subordinate categories" (Viola, 2020b, p. 22). Viola's Closure Thesis speaks to the liberal governance of difference, which resonates directly with Law's One-World World (Law, 2015). She writes, "the very diffusion and expansion of liberal norms requires and creates a process of *illiberal homogenization* that denies, or denigrates, certain kinds of diversity" (Viola, 2020b, p. 10, emphasis mine). Additionally, "'expansion' is based on a politics of sameness rather than a politics of difference" (Viola, 2020b, p. 10).

I expand on Viola's institutional closure to think of the OECD's epistemic closure, wherein its internal stratification limits the possibilities of its Latin American members to significantly shape the Organisation's work and education agenda. The OECD's membership expansion has been based on principles of 'like-mindedness' and how this is reflected in the stratification between historical and peripheral members in the OECD. The homogenisation of the international system has both diminished the diversity of international political actors, i.e., 'outsiders', and increased stratification between 'insiders' (Viola, 2020b, pp. 27–28). Viola points to the fact that the 'opening up' of international institutions for the Global South demonstrates "how narrowly international rights are conceived to begin with" (Viola, 2020b, p. 27), rather than affirming IR's assumption that

international institutions have become increasingly more democratic and egalitarian.

In my research, I have argued that the OECD membership expansion operates as a mechanism of governmentality (Deuel, 2022; Viola, 2020a), reinforcing the Organisation's identity as a space for Western self-identification (Hongler, 2017) rather than transforming its epistemic foundations (Werkstetter Caravaca, 2025). This means that despite no longer being exclusively the 'Club of the Rich', broadening both the geographic reach (through programmes such as PISA for Development) and the 'thickening' (Robertson, 2016) of its governance in policy areas (by focusing e.g., on teachers' career and curriculum reform), the OECD's centralised structure and persistent *Northern lens* (Boatcă, 2021, p. 1984) limits the influence of Latin American members, reproducing an internal stratification that continuously marginalises Southern perspectives.

In the case of the OECD, political authority, as well as social capital and financial contributions by member states, characterise the stratification within the OECD and its peripheral members, as well as between the OECD and national actors, as described by brokers (Werkstetter Caravaca, 2025, p. 61). The OECD sets up both an internal and external system of stratification: between members and non-members, but also within the Organisation, between historical members and newer members, as well as between centre and margin. In the past, this has also been the case among European members: there are those who have historically been peripheral within the OECD, for example those who first became recipients of development aid through the OECD's predecessor the OEEC, i.e., through the Mediterranean Regional Project (MRP) (see Elfert & Ydesen, 2023; Granata, 2022; Leimgruber & Schmelzer, 2017; Lyons, 1964).

Together, these dynamics reveal the OECD not as a disinterested technocratic body but as an institution deeply embedded in geopolitical hierarchies and reproducing enduring epistemic inequalities. For its Latin American members, joining the OECD has been accompanied by a sense that they have arrived onto the global stage, while still in the process of catching up. This speaks to a 'Southering' (Grotlüschen & Buddeberg, 2020, p. 168) through which the Global South (or those at the bottom of global rankings) are perpetually stuck in the past within the linear progressions of the OECD's development paradigm. Grotlüschen and Buddeberg (2020) demonstrate in their analysis of ILSAs—specifically, the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC)—that their use as country performance measurements contributes to "pronounced deficit perspective[s]" (Grotlüschen & Buddeberg, 2020, p. 167) on countries and regions in the Global South, constituting a 'Southering'. Here 'Southering' is informed by Said's 'Othering' and used to "analyse processes which might result from international measurement of competences" (Grotlüschen & Buddeberg, 2020, p. 171).

'Catching up' becomes its own state of being or temporality. This temporal aspect highlights the developmentalist aspect of the OECD and speaks to the violence of its Northern lens, in which Europe—or indeed, only certain educational systems in Europe—are imagined as the future.[2] Ultimately, the OECD "predominantly represented the interests of the more powerful nation-states and the dominant social forces within them […] thus contributing to the reproduction of the hegemonic embedded-liberal development order" (Ruckert, 2008, p. 101).

Both the internal and external stratification of the OECD's Directorate for Education and Skills speak to the limits of its comparison regime, as does the OECD's Northern lens. The OECD insists on the technical and not political character of its work, neglecting the power relations implicit in the technologies of governance it has been so fundamental in developing and legitimising. There is also

a historical friction in this type of posturing in a North-South encounter –the reproduction of colonial hierarchies in 'development' (see Escobar, 1995; Rodney, 1974), also in the field of education (see Menashy, 2019; Menashy & Zakharia, 2022). The OECD's neoliberal technocracy –defined as "quasi-scientification, branding policy economics, rationale internalization, *dashboarding*, and decontextualizing politics" (Alawattage & Elshihry, 2017, p. 170)–prioritises skills-based education, labour market competitiveness, and economic efficiency over other education paradigms. Given its expansion after the end of the Cold War and the conspicuous inclusion of the Global South the OECD now has an increasingly global vocation, still it remains an exclusive club. For decades, the OECD has been an arena in which the West has discussed its interests without needing to listen to the Global South, and this largely remains the case.

Seizing the Future

Within the increasingly crowded global education policy field, international organisations such as UNESCO and the OECD have faced growing pressure to become more inclusive. Though IOs are ultimately expert-driven (Addey, 2024; Fritsch et al., 2024; Kranke, 2022; Littoz-Monnet, 2017), they have sought the inclusion of overlooked and marginalised voices to sustain their legitimacy. The OECD is significantly burdened by its own history in this respect. Unlike UNESCO, which has always had a global membership, the OECD emerged from the Cold War as the economic counterpart to NATO and has maintained an exclusive membership structure ever since. Despite this the OECD has always been shaped by the Global South –indeed, it has historically positioned itself in opposition to the Global South. This is how the OECD's approach to data production has historically been rooted in the epistemic and policy frameworks of its largely North Atlantic alliance, raising not only questions about the validity of its data, but concerns about the unintended consequences its governance mechanisms might incur in countries where the Organisation has less institutional experience and wherein transformative education paradigms may be at odds with those of the OECD. As it stands, the OECD's governance structures remain deeply stratified and Eurocentric, despite the admission of Latin American countries into the club. While Latin American policymakers and education officials actively engage with the OECD, their ability to shape its epistemic frameworks remains limited. It remains an Organisation where power is centralised in Paris, with decision-making dominated by its historical North Atlantic core.

What would it be to have education measurements based on Southern theory (Connell, 2021)? Would these teach us to transgress (hooks, 2014), and build reparative futures (Sriprakash et al., 2020)? Would global education rankings lose their power? Would it then become possible to instead build transnational solidarities for education systems that serve to live a good life, rather than to serve capital? These questions motivate my efforts here to unsettle dominant narratives of global educational expertise. My research has focused on dispelling the OECD as a neutral, data-driven organisation in the field of education, to demonstrate its normative character, particularly as the OECD's authority continues to rest on 'neutral' tools of comparison that often mask inequalities and exclude Southern perspectives.

The OECD's role in education reflects a particular epistemic and ideological orientation rooted in neoliberal governmentality. The OECD's emphasis on standardisation and accountability often comes at the expense of educational approaches that prioritise collective knowledge and social transformation. The challenge is not simply about resisting OECD influence but about expanding the conversation on what education should be –not merely a mechanism for producing skilled workers, but a space for critical thinking, cultural affirmation, and deep democratic engagement. In turn, this

raises the question 'measuring for whom?' and on the need for alternative paradigms of education –ones that are humanising rather than focused solely on economic utility.

Ultimately, this calls for a reimagining of education governance beyond the OECD's dominant paradigm, centring alternative models that recognise Other ways of being and knowing, and resist the pressures of neoliberal subjectification. These education paradigms already exist, they have histories, they are enacted –we do not need to start anew. After all, decolonisation is future-minded –as it is not about returning to a lost past, but rather about seizing the future.

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1. This designation as the 'Club of the Rich' "has always been complicated by the membership of European peripheral countries such as Portugal, Spain, Greece, and Turkey that resulted largely as a historical relic from the Marshall Plan era" (Leimgruber & Schmelzer, 2023, p. 20)

2. For more on the violence of the temporal politics of colonialism, imperialism, and development see Rao (2020).