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scientized policy and epistemic authority in global education

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Scientization operates as a mechanism of global education governance through which international organizations construct epistemic authority and shape educational policy legitimacy. This authority is institutionalized through standardized indicators, international assessments, and evidence-based frameworks that define credible educational knowledge and reform. International organizations have long navigated ideological disagreement and geopolitical competition, yet challenges to the liberal international order have not displaced their role in defining legitimate educational knowledge and reform. Through epistemic gatekeeping more than direct coercion, these organizations reinforce shared policy expectations and encourage cross-national isomorphism. These processes privilege quantifiable evidence, marginalize context-specific knowledge, and constrain educational policy alternatives.

Keywords: epistemic authority, evidence-based policymaking, global education governance, international organizations, scientization

Global education policy is shaped by claims of scientific authority, objectivity, and technical rigor (Luke, 2011; Zapp, 2021). Across national systems, decisions about schooling, accountability, and reform are routinely justified through standardized indicators, international assessments, and evidence-based frameworks that promise comparability and neutrality (Verger et al., 2019). This trend reflects a broader transformation in global governance in which power is exercised less through direct regulation and more through the diffusion of policy models, data infrastructures, and normative expectations grounded in scientific expertise (Skerritt, 2023; Windzio & Martens, 2022). Understanding the emergence and consequences of this shift requires attention to the growing role of scientized epistemic authority in global education governance (Bandola-Gill et al., 2023).

Although often framed as a neutral commitment to evidence-based policymaking, scientization is historically rooted in epistemic traditions associated with Western Enlightenment conceptions of rationality, measurement, and technocratic administration (Bekele, 2021). These traditions are often embedded in the international organizations that influence education around the world. International organizations are formal durable organizational arrangements established by multiple states to facilitate cooperation and pursue shared purposes, typically possessing permanent administrative structures and some degree of organizational autonomy from their member governments (Abbott & Snidal, 1998; Barnett & Finnemore, 1999). As these traditions became institutionalized within international organizations and global policy infrastructures, they increasingly defined the empirical standards by which education systems are evaluated worldwide. The result is not simply the diffusion of scientific methods, but the elevation of particular knowledge traditions as universally authoritative, often marginalizing locally grounded, experiential, or contextually embedded forms of

knowledge that do not easily translate into standardized forms of evidence (Canagarajah, 2002). Comparative research on education governance in diverse national contexts, including policy reform processes in the Middle East, illustrates how global evidence frameworks are frequently localized through negotiation and adaptation while still privileging internationally legitimized indicators, evaluation models, and policy narratives over historically embedded national knowledge practices (Wiseman, 2010).

International organizations have played a central role in institutionalizing this form of authority. Organizations such as the OECD, World Bank, and IEA function not only as policy advisors but also as key producers and validators of comparative education knowledge, shaping how educational success, quality, and equity are defined and measured (Zapp, 2021). Through indicators, rankings, and comparative reports, these organizations establish influential standards against which national education systems are evaluated, generating powerful expectations about what constitutes legitimate policy (Lawn, 2008; Niemann & Martens, 2018). Alignment with globally accepted evidence and benchmarks increasingly becomes a condition for policy credibility among national decision-makers (Bexell, 2014).

Scientization thus operates as a central mechanism of epistemic governance in global education, structuring how knowledge is produced, validated, and mobilized for policy decision making (Wiseman et al., 2016). While often presented as a technical or methodological development, the expansion of evidence-based policy also represents a reconfiguration of authority within education systems, elevating particular forms of knowledge while marginalizing others (Roberts, 2023). Examining how epistemic authority is constructed and sustained helps illuminate the broader political implications of scientized governance for equity, knowledge pluralism, and democratic accountability across national and transnational education contexts (Bekele, 2021). This article examines scientization as an epistemic ordering process within global education governance, analyzing how internationally standardized evidence regimes enable cross-national policy coordination while simultaneously narrowing the range of knowledge traditions recognized as legitimate foundations for educational reform.

The Rise of Scientized Epistemic Authority in Global Education

Global education governance has undergone an isomorphic transformation marked by the scientization of policy knowledge (Krick et al., 2019). Education systems are increasingly evaluated, compared, and guided through standardized indicators, international assessments, and evidence-based frameworks that claim technical neutrality and often assume universal applicability (Wiseman, 2010). This shift has elevated particular forms of knowledge (e.g., quantified, comparative, and methodologically standardized) into the implementation and reproduction of global educational decision-making (Wiseman & Davidson, 2018). As a result, power in global education manifests itself less through formal authority or coercive mechanisms than through epistemic authority: the capacity to define what counts as valid evidence, credible reform, and legitimate progress (Papanastasiou, 2024).

This transformation is not merely a technocratic development but a fundamental reconfiguration of governance itself. International organizations such as the OECD, the World Bank, and the IEA have emerged as central epistemic gatekeepers, shaping global education agendas by producing, validating, and circulating policy-relevant knowledge (Kallo, 2021). Their influence lies not in mandating compliance but in establishing the conceptual and empirical standards against which

national systems are evaluated. As comparative data, rankings, and policy reports circulate globally, they generate powerful normative expectations that subtly but persistently narrow the range of conceivable policy responses (Martens, 2007). Education policy becomes less a matter of democratic deliberation and more a process of alignment with globally sanctioned evidence regimes.

Importantly, this scientization of education policy is neither accidental nor politically neutral. It reflects institutionally patterned processes through which empirical comparative research and institutional dynamics have become mutually reinforcing (Wiseman & Taylor, 2017). Over time, empirical evidence has come to function as a legitimating force as much as an empirical base. This means that scientized evidence confers credibility on certain reforms while marginalizing alternative ways of knowing and governing education (Martens, 2022). This dynamic has intensified in the twenty-first century, as crises such as pandemics and both growing social inequalities and political ideologies have further entrenched demands for rapid, evidence-driven solutions, often at the cost of contextual sensitivity and equity considerations (Hwang et al., 2021).

Understanding scientized epistemic authority, therefore, requires moving beyond questions of data quality or methodological rigor. It requires attention to how knowledge itself, and particular kinds and origins of knowledge, becomes power in global education governance and to the institutional structures that sustain this transformation.

Neo-Institutional Theory and the Foundations of Epistemic Power

Neo-institutional theory offers several explanations for how international organizations exercise epistemic authority in education governance despite limited formal regulatory power. Rather than assuming that global policy diffusion reflects logical, linear, and evidence-based effectiveness, neo-institutionalism emphasizes legitimacy, shared cultural models, and taken-for-granted norms as key mechanisms shaping convergence across national education systems (Drori et al., 2003). From this perspective, international organizations derive influence primarily from their capacity to define authoritative knowledge, establish evaluative standards, and signal what counts as legitimate or 'best' educational practice (Zapp, 2021).

A central contribution of neo-institutional theory is the distinction between institutional legitimacy and technical effectiveness. Education reforms frequently gain international traction not because they demonstrably improve outcomes, but because they align with globally institutionalized expectations of what 'good' education systems should look like (Wiseman et al., 2013). International assessments, benchmarking systems, and policy indicators function as symbolic markers of legitimacy that shape which forms of evidence and reform are considered credible, thereby embedding epistemic authority in the standards themselves (Wiseman et al., 2014).

Epistemic authority is reinforced as specific categories, metrics, and comparative frameworks become institutionalized and taken for granted. Once widely adopted, these knowledge structures operate as default reference points for policymakers and researchers, narrowing the range of policy alternatives considered legitimate (Smith & Baker, 2001; Wiseman, 2021b). International organizations contribute to this process by repeatedly circulating standardized forms of knowledge that are framed as neutral, scientific, and universally applicable, thereby stabilizing shared cognitive and normative expectations (Wiseman & Waluyo, 2017).

Neo-institutional concepts such as institutional isomorphism further clarify how epistemic authority

translates into policy alignment across diverse contexts. Comparative research shows that national education systems often adopt globally recognized models of accountability, assessment, and professionalism even in the absence of coercive pressure (Baker & LeTendre, 2005). Participation in international benchmarking exercises, such as large-scale assessments, becomes a signal of responsible governance, while divergence risks reputational costs associated with perceived illegitimacy (Mundy, 2007; Wiseman, 2013).

Taken together, neo-institutional theory highlights that the power of international organizations in education lies less in enforcement than in their capacity to institutionalize particular forms of knowledge as authoritative. By shaping the categories, comparisons, and evaluative frameworks through which education systems understand performance and reform, these organizations exercise epistemic influence that structures both policy agendas and the boundaries of legitimate debate (Finnemore, 1993).

International Organizations as Epistemic Gatekeepers

Recent challenges to international organizations (IOs) should not be interpreted as a wholly novel rupture in global education governance. IOs have long operated amid ideological disagreement, geopolitical competition, and nationally differentiated education systems (e.g., Cherewka & Prins, 2022; Elfert, 2021; Mundy & Verger, 2015); what has changed is the intensity and visibility of challenges to the institutions and norms associated with the liberal international order. Even under these conditions, however, recent evidence points less to the displacement of IOs than to the continued institutionalization of their role in defining legitimate educational problems and policy responses. Niemann et al. (2026), for example, find that IOs retain distinct ideological profiles in their treatment of migrant and refugee education, but also that their policy discourse is constrained by shared, institutionalized expectations about legitimate educational policy.

Similarly, Niemann et al. (2025) show that IOs approach educational digitalization differently according to their organizational mandates and policy orientations rather than converging on a single global position. These findings are important, but they can obscure a deeper continuity: disagreement over policy content does not necessarily imply erosion of authority. Indeed, the capacity of international organizations to define the categories within which such disagreements occur, often by identifying problems such as inclusion, digitalization, skills, or performance as objects of systematic comparison and intervention, may itself indicate the continuing legitimacy of IO-mediated global education governance. In this sense, contemporary contestation is occurring substantially within an institutionalized field of global educational expertise rather than simply displacing that field.

This distinction becomes clearer when the influence of international organizations is understood as epistemic and scientized authority rather than policy consensus. Zapp's (2021) analysis of the OECD, UNESCO, and World Bank demonstrates that scientific knowledge production has become a major source of organizational legitimacy in global education governance: IOs establish authority by producing research, evidence, indicators, and policy-relevant knowledge that enable them to define educational problems and legitimate particular modes of intervention. Rautalin et al. (2021) similarly document the historical scientization of OECD policy advice, showing how the organization progressively constructed its authority through increasingly scientific forms of justification directed toward national governments.

Other evidence suggests that this epistemic infrastructure remains deeply institutionalized rather

than receding. For example, international assessments continue to connect national systems to transnational networks of comparison and policy learning, while knowledge production by UNESCO, OECD, and World Bank remains organized through extensive expert communities whose publications structure and reproduce epistemic authority in global education governance (Baek, 2026; Zapp, 2021). Thus, the persistence of ideological variation identified by Niemann et al. (2025) and Niemann et al. (2026) may actually reinforce rather than contradict this argument. IOs need not secure agreement on a common educational position or perspective to retain authority. Their more fundamental power lies in sustaining the scientized infrastructures through which educational conditions become knowable, comparable, and actionable in the first place.

In other words, challenges to the liberal international order may alter which policies international organizations advocate and how their recommendations are received without necessarily dislodging the epistemic conventions through which their expertise continues to be legitimated globally and incorporated into national policymaking. Therefore, building on the scientized empirical infrastructure described above, international organizations exercise epistemic power by acting as gatekeepers that determine which forms of knowledge circulate within global education policy arenas. Their influence lies less in coercive authority than in their capacity to institutionalize the technical standards, comparison tools, and interpretive frameworks through which education systems are evaluated.

One key mechanism is the construction and institutionalization of indicators. Indicators translate the broader scientization of education knowledge into operational governance tools by defining which dimensions of education are rendered visible, measurable, and comparable across systems. Once embedded within assessment programs, benchmarking systems, and international reporting cycles, these indicators coordinate action across national policy environments by aligning evaluation criteria rather than mandating specific reforms (Wiseman, 2013). Their authority derives from repetition, standardization, and integration into global reporting infrastructures, making them increasingly difficult to contest.

A second mechanism involves authorship, peer validation, and methodological standard setting. Reports produced by international organizations are framed as technical syntheses grounded in expert review and standardized analytical procedures. These processes reinforce the legitimacy of scientized forms of evidence while narrowing the range of acceptable interpretations and policy narratives. As illustrated by the World Bank's education strategies and policy reports, knowledge production does not merely summarize existing research; it actively structures global policy discourse by privileging specific causal explanations, reform sequences, and empirical hierarchies (Collins & Wiseman, 2012).

A third mechanism is agenda setting through comparative best practice narratives. International assessments such as PISA translate comparative findings into reform signals by identifying systems positioned as exemplars of effective policy design, which is often measured indirectly by high average student achievement outcomes. These narratives operate not through direct prescription but through the establishment of shared expectations regarding what modern and responsible policymaking should resemble (Wiseman & Waluyo, 2017). In this way, agenda setting mechanisms extend the epistemic effects of scientization by linking measurement infrastructures to reform imaginaries.

Through the combined operation of indicator systems, expert authored knowledge products, and

comparative policy narratives, international organizations function as epistemic gatekeepers that shape the production, validation, and circulation of education policy knowledge. Their role is therefore best understood not as separate from scientization, but as the institutional expression of scientized epistemic governance operating within global policy networks.

Consensus, Convergence, and the Narrowing of Policy Imagination

When scientized evidence infrastructures and institutional gatekeeping mechanisms operate together over time, they generate a third order effect: the gradual emergence of policy consensus and convergence across education systems. Consensus is produced not primarily through formal negotiation or legislative harmonization, but through the normalization of shared empirical standards and interpretive frameworks that shape how policy problems are understood in the first place.

Early research on the internationalization of education policy demonstrated how global models diffuse rapidly across national systems under the banner of modernization and improvement (Wiseman & Baker, 2005, 2006). What becomes clearer in retrospect is that this diffusion is sustained by the epistemic alignment produced through scientized measurement systems, indicator regimes, and comparative policy narratives described in the preceding sections. Alignment appears rational and inevitable because policy debates unfold within already standardized frameworks of evaluation and comparison.

As convergence deepens, contextual variation is increasingly reframed as deviation from globally recognized benchmarks rather than as legitimate institutional diversity. Local histories, governance arrangements, and sociopolitical conditions become secondary to performance indicators that prioritize cross-national comparability (Gorur, 2017; Grek, 2009; Kirsch & Braun, 2020). The narrowing of policy imagination follows as reform options that do not align with dominant evidence frameworks are more readily dismissed as unscientific, inefficient, or politically motivated.

The appearance of consensus can also obscure persistent structural inequalities. Aggregate indicators may signal improvement while concealing uneven distributional outcomes across social groups and regions (Gottlieb et al., 2025; Wiseman & Davidson, 2021). Even when countries adopt similar reforms, benefits often accrue unevenly, reinforcing existing hierarchies (Wiseman, 2021a). Yet the epistemic authority of global evidence regimes limits the visibility of these disparities by defining success through standardized outcome measures that prioritize comparability over contextual interpretation.

Taken together, the processes of scientization, epistemic gatekeeping, and policy convergence form a mutually reinforcing governance dynamic. Scientization establishes the empirical infrastructure, international organizations institutionalize and circulate that infrastructure, and the resulting epistemic alignment produces convergence in policy language, expectations, and reform trajectories. Recognizing this interconnected sequence is essential for reopening space for deliberation, plurality, and alternative policy imaginaries within global education governance.

Implications for Equity, Knowledge Pluralism, and Democratic Governance

The epistemic power exercised by international organizations has consequences that extend well beyond policy alignment or technical reform. At its core, scientized global education governance raises normative questions about equity, whose knowledge matters, and how democratic

accountability is sustained when authority over evidence is increasingly externalized. While scientization is often justified as a means of improving rigor and comparability, its effects are far from neutral.

One of the most significant implications concerns knowledge exclusion. Scientized policy regimes privilege forms of knowledge that are quantifiable, standardized, and scalable, often at the expense of local, qualitative, Indigenous, and context-specific understandings of education. As global evidence infrastructures increasingly define what counts as 'valid' knowledge, alternative ways of knowing are marginalized not because they lack relevance, but because they lack compatibility with dominant epistemic frameworks. This narrowing of epistemic space contributes to what can be understood as a form of symbolic exclusion where certain voices, experiences, and contexts are rendered invisible within global policy discourse.

This dynamic is evident in the declining plurality of comparative and international education research itself. As I have argued elsewhere, the field has witnessed a measurable contraction in methodological, geographic, and epistemic diversity, with growing dominance of particular data sources, analytical approaches, and publication venues (Wiseman, 2023). This trend mirrors broader patterns of scientization in global education governance, where legitimacy increasingly hinges on alignment with established evidence regimes rather than responsiveness to contextual complexity. The result is a feedback loop: global policy priorities shape research agendas, which in turn reinforce the epistemic authority of those same policy frameworks.

These effects are especially pronounced in the relationship between the Global North and Global South. Scientized evidence regimes, often developed and controlled by institutions headquartered in the Global North, tend to universalize particular assumptions about schooling, effectiveness, and improvement. While framed as globally applicable, these assumptions frequently obscure structural inequalities, historical legacies, and resource disparities. Research on refugee education provides a clear illustration. Comparative analyses of refugee policy and practice reveal persistent gaps between rights-based global commitments and the lived educational realities of displaced learners, gaps that are often masked by aggregate indicators and compliance-oriented reporting (Wiseman et al., 2019). In such cases, scientized evidence can inadvertently legitimize inequitable outcomes by emphasizing system performance over human experience.

Finally, the externalization of epistemic authority raises concerns about democratic governance. When international organizations define problems, set benchmarks, and evaluate progress through technocratic evidence systems, decision-making authority shifts away from national publics, local communities, and democratic deliberation. This is particularly problematic in contexts where data are incomplete, unavailable, or systematically exclude certain populations. As demonstrated in work on refugee, asylee, and humanitarian migrant students, the absence of reliable data is not merely a technical limitation but an epistemic failure with material consequences (Wiseman & Bell, 2022). Populations that are not counted or not countable within prevailing frameworks are often excluded from policy consideration.

Taken together, these implications suggest that scientization, while powerful, is also deeply political. If global education governance is to support equity and democratic accountability, greater attention must be paid to epistemic pluralism, transparency in knowledge production, and the normative assumptions embedded in evidence itself. Without such reflexivity, epistemic power risks reinforcing the very inequalities that global education policy purports to address.

Toward Reflexive and Responsible Epistemic Power

Epistemic power in global education is neither abstract nor incidental. It is produced, stabilized, and exercised through scientized forms of evidence that carry legitimacy precisely because they appear neutral, technical, and universally applicable. Yet, as decades of comparative and international education research have demonstrated, the authority of such knowledge is deeply institutionalized and socially constructed. International organizations do not merely disseminate evidence; they shape the conditions under which certain forms of knowledge are recognized as credible, actionable, and worthy of policy attention. Despite its profound influence on national education systems, this epistemic power remains insufficiently examined.

Treating scientization as a political process rather than a purely methodological one is therefore a reasonable approach to educational reform, policy, and decision-making. The elevation of quantification, comparison, and standardized indicators does not simply improve decision-making; it also narrows the boundaries of legitimate debate, privileges particular actors and epistemologies, and obscures value-laden choices behind claims of technical necessity (Elfert & Ydesen, 2023, pp. 169–192). As earlier work on neo-institutional theory has shown, global education policies gain authority not because they are universally effective, but because they align with shared expectations of what 'modern,' 'rational,' and 'evidence-based' systems should look like (Meyer et al., 1997; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Wiseman & Baker, 2005). In this sense, scientization functions as a mechanism of governance, converting normative judgments into seemingly objective imperatives.

These dynamics place responsibility not only on international organizations, but also on scholars of comparative and international education. Researchers are not neutral observers standing outside epistemic regimes; they are participants whose theories, methods, and publication practices help reproduce or potentially disrupt the very structures of legitimacy they critique (Hamati-Ataya, 2014, 2018; Haraway, 1988). Comparative research framed by neo-institutional theory has long emphasized this symbiotic relationship between knowledge production and institutional authority. Revisiting this insight is particularly relevant at a time when global consensus around evidence-based policy risks crowding out contextual, qualitative, and locally grounded forms of knowledge.

Moving toward more reflexive and responsible epistemic power does not require rejecting international comparison, evidence, or global cooperation. Rather, it suggests the need for greater transparency about how evidence is constructed, whose knowledge is amplified, and whose experiences remain marginal. For international organizations, this entails acknowledging the normative dimensions of their knowledge practices. For scholars, it requires sustained reflexivity about how research contributes to global scripts of legitimacy. Only by confronting epistemic power directly can comparative and international education fulfill its critical promise; not simply to explain global patterns, but to question the authority through which those patterns are made meaningful.

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