



The World Bank and Education: Governing (through) knowledge



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ABSTRACT

The World Bank has become one of the most influential actors in global education governance. Much research on the World Bank's role in education has focused on coercive and regulative mechanisms. The paper examines the WB's epistemic influence in shaping educational knowledge. This article analyses its activities as producer, manager and transmitter of knowledge. Analyzing the evolution of the WB's research and publication record, its knowledge management and project outreach since its creation, the article will show how it has become one of the world's most important research producers in education. Through disseminating, teaching, applying and celebrating specific kinds of educational knowledge, its role as an educational knowledge clearinghouse has expanded to change the global education discourse.

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1. Introduction

The World Bank (WB), initially the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), had been founded in 1944 to assist in post-war reconstruction. With the founding of the International Development Association (IDA) in 1960, it extended its mission to global development.¹ Compared to other international organizations (IOs), the WB today features the highest number in staff (more than 10,000 employees), widest geographic scope (genuinely global) and broadest substantive coverage (including all human development areas).

In the decades following its founding and growth, the WB has gradually evolved from a global financial facilitator into an important global agency involved in funding, advising and planning educational policies worldwide. While its early work in education prioritized on providing resources for infrastructure and financing manpower training, its focus shifted, along with the general development discourse, to basic education and early childhood education in the 1970s and 1980s (Chabbott, 2003; Jones, 2007). Today, the WB is, by far, the largest funding institution in education in the world covering all educational sectors from early childhood care and education to tertiary education and lifelong learning.

Studies dealing with the WB's role in education are often interested in unearthing the ideological underpinnings of its education recommendations and in tracing its effects on public education systems and learning opportunities. As the major global lending institution, its loan conditionality has been shown to systematically involve reforms in education. In these studies, the WB is primarily analysed in terms of its coercive or regulative power (Jones, 1997; Klees, 2002; Klees and Edwards, 2014).

More recently, scholarly contributions have started to take into account the normative influence of the WB by focusing on such mechanisms as agenda-setting and policy-design in education.

Yet, despite this shift towards 'softer governance', little attention has been given to the cognitive or epistemic role of the WB. Thus, here the WB would primarily be understood as a producer, manager and transmitter of educational knowledge worldwide. Since 1996, when then-president James Wolfensohn announced that the World Bank is to become the 'Knowledge Bank', the organization has implemented a series of strategies to reform its internal management and operational portfolio. This 'knowledge turn' did not only involve major changes in the use and provision of its knowledge management systems. The WB has invested heavily in knowledge production, namely research, in all its units, particularly in education. The Bank (as it calls itself) has become, in the last 15 years, the most productive scientific institution and data generator for a wide array of research areas including education. Its *Development Research Group* was nominated 'best government-affiliated think tank in the world' in 2015, and the associated *World Bank Institute* comes fifth in the same report published by the *Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program* (University of Pennsylvania).

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¹ Together, IBRD and IDA are referred to as the World Bank (WB) and they are dealt with in this paper. In addition, the World Bank Group comprises the International Finance Corporation (1956), the International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes (1966) and the Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency (1988).

Drawing on its own, rapidly growing, body of research, the WB now also actively seeks to disseminate its gathered knowledge. Such dissemination occurs through publications (books, journals, conferences), databases and, to an increasing extent, through offering seminars, courses and on-line learning formats, more and more resembling a conventional (yet global) higher education research institution. It also directly applies its knowledge in the field through a drastically growing number of projects with an explicit focus on education around the globe.

These and other novel practices, discussed in this paper, have the potential to fundamentally alter the kind of influence the WB exerts worldwide. As a consequence, scholarship on global education has to rethink the analytical apparatus applied to the study of global educational governance.

In the first part of the paper, available literature on global educational governance from comparative education scholarship enables the identification of mechanisms and rationales of governance found in IOs in general and for the WB in particular.

Then, I trace the ‘knowledge turn’ in education at the WB from its incipient stage in the mid-1990s to its most recent innovation, the *Systems Approach for Better Educational Results* (SABER) in 2014. Empirically, the analysis draws on various sources of quantitative data to provide evidence supporting the hypothesis of an emerging focus on knowledge within the Bank’s (educational) work. This ‘knowledge turn’ is analysed in terms of the WB’s research, scientific output, scientisation of output, increase in knowledge-assembling and application and its burgeoning teaching portfolio.

The final section discusses the WB’s epistemic practices in educational knowledge governance as a showcase of *epistemic governance* defined as the production, processing, diffusion and use of policy-relevant knowledge.

2. International organizations in the study of global educational governance

In recent years, global or international dimensions in the guise of international organizations (IOs) have been systematically introduced into the study of educational governance and policy-making. Important macro-approaches emphasizing the role of IOs in globalizing education include, for instance, Mundy’s (2007:20) concept of *educational multilateralism* depicting IOs as ‘a new venue for political contests over shared norms and institutions’. In a similar vein, Parreira do Amaral (2011) sees an *international regime* rising in education with governmental and non-governmental, national and international organisations institutionalizing education globally.

Further, research from fields such as comparative and international (development) education interested in the movement of educational policies investigate the roles of individual international actors. Here, IOs are treated, at times, as ‘hard’ players that regulate, fund and, hereby, impose education by tricking states into new policies (Dale, 2005), at times, more softly, as ‘teachers of norms’ (Finnemore, 1993) or ‘knowledge brokers’ (Jakobi, 2006a, b). In the latter case, as the ‘sociology of measurement in education policy’ (Gorur, 2014) takes shape paying particular attention to international organizations (IOs) and their diverse roles in national policy making (Fenwick et al., 2014) governance mechanisms may include coordination and comparison (Martens and Niemann, 2010), agenda-setting (Jakobi, 2006a,b) and evaluation (Rivera 2006, 2009). The whole field is understood to be in a ‘metrological mood’ (Power, 2004) entering an ‘age of measurement’ (Biesta, 2009; also Heyneman and Lykins, 2008; Meyer and Benavot, 2013).

Such approaches are highly useful in providing a fresh perspective on how to rethink educational planning in a globalized world, acknowledging the critical importance IOs have acquired in the past two decades. These contributions have added up to a fine-grained analytical apparatus helping to understand how IOs influence national and other IOs’ educational policy-making.

Against the backdrop of these analyses, we can considerably extend Jakobi’s (2009) classification on governance instruments discussed in the context of lifelong learning from UNESCO, EU, OECD and WB (Table 1) loosely borrowing a classical sociological scheme to distinguish between different processes of institutionalization (Scott, 2001).

In a *regulative* perspective, Dale (2005), for example, proposes to look at funding, provision, ownership and regulation as key activities in EU educational governance. In his *pluri-scalar governance of education* these activities are renegotiated along subnational, national and supranational levels. Further, the notorious Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) and more recently Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), as part of the ‘Washington Consensus’ (Held, 2005) imply hefty conditionality tied to loans and might serve as an example of *coercive* governance (Reimers, 1994; Jones, 1997; Heyneman, 2003; Mundy and Verger, 2015).

WTO/GATS might be another example of (controversial) regulation in education. Although actual effects on national education systems remain still limited, implications are thought to be far-reaching (Robertson et al., 2002; Scherrer, 2007). The recent Trade in Services Agreement (TiSA) negotiated between the EU, the USA and some other 20 Asian and Latin American countries has not yet been discussed in the literature in its potential

Table 1
Governance mechanisms of international organizations.

Mechanism	coercive/regulative	normative	cognitive/epistemic
Practices	provision ownership funding conditionality treaties/sanctions	standard-setting coordination surveillance persuasion	knowledge production & dissemination theorization mimesis
Basis of legitimacy	legally sanctioned & enforced	morally governed	cultural
Examples	GATS & TiSA WB & IMF Structural Adjustment and Poverty Reduction Strategies	EU Open Method of Coordination OECD Peer Reviewing & Benchmarks UNESCO Recommendations	common development models & organizational principles & action frameworks knowledge diffusion among IOs

Hard ← **Governance Continuum** → **Soft**

(Source: authors’ own depiction)

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