

The making of education development over time: from influencing bureaucrats to changing teachers

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This paper will look at changes in the work of international organisations in education from the 1950s to 2020 by analysing changes in the focus of the proposals of UNESCO, the World Bank and OECD and in the governance mechanisms that these organisations use to influence education policies in different parts of the world. The presentation is based on an analysis of the most important documents about education produced by these organisations between the 1950s and 2020.

My argument is that the focus of these organisations has increasingly shifted from promoting technical tools for governing education by reforming the organisational structures of the macro level to very detailed definitions of desirable teaching practices and learning outcomes. At the same time the mechanisms that were used to influence education policies and practices also changed, from meetings of experts with high ranked officials, to the use of international large-scale assessments, governance by numbers and producing materials directly aimed at teachers.

In the 1950s and 60s, as international organisations increased their power and activity in education, their focus was mainly in promoting educational planning and increasing access to education. The audience were high ranked officials usually located at national ministries of education.

In the 1980s and 1990s the idea that social changes (such as knowledge economies or the information age) required a new kind of educational system became common sense. Based on the assumption of a world of permanent changes driven by technological advancements, UNESCO, the World Bank and OCED promoted a universal model of education for the information age as the solution to the education challenges of the time (Beech, 2011). The proposals of these agencies got into detailed definitions about the content of the curriculum and the kind of pedagogic practices that should be used in classrooms.

In the 2000s, global policy spaces became even more complex, with the increasing power of international large-scale assessments (notably PISA and its league tables) and the growing participation of for-profit corporations. McKinsey and the OECD have been very influential in promoting the idea that teachers are the most important factor in improving the quality of education. This view had a strong impact on education policies all over the world, but also at the level of global actors themselves. The OECD is producing lesson plans for teachers and the World Bank offers a classroom observation tool to assess how teachers use time, and the kind of classroom culture and socio-emotional skills they promote.