

## 9. Knowledge brokerage and global governance: current research trends and future avenues for research

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### INTRODUCTION

The rise of knowledge brokers, who first turn data into evidence and then promote the use of research evidence for policy and planning, has become noticeable. Traditional knowledge producers, such as universities, have expanded and redefined their roles and activities and embraced knowledge brokerage as a means to have societal impact. Furthermore, the rapid advance of associations, think tanks, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and government-sponsored research institutions that analyze and promote knowledge on “what works” studies and practices is remarkable. The title of this edited book reflects the growing influence and evolving roles of knowledge brokers in this field, signaling a significant shift in the discourse on global education governance.<sup>1</sup>

The chapters included in this book offer insights into the extent and direction of the advance of knowledge brokerage, painting a picture of the current landscape of knowledge brokerage. The book gives the floor to experts from diverse sectors, including academia, international organizations, governments, NGOs, and foundations, to share their perspectives, institutional rationales, and analyses of the interface between research and policy. By doing so, we aim to be knowledge brokers ourselves on this topic. Each chapter contributes to our understanding of knowledge brokerage through the analysis of different roles played by various actors, the strategies employed, the influence of contextual factors, and the implications for equity and inclusion. By synthesizing these diverse contributions, this concluding chapter first discusses current

research trends in knowledge brokerage and highlights the key findings of the book. We conclude this chapter by identifying emerging themes and areas for further research.

## CURRENT RESEARCH TRENDS

Recent trends in research on global knowledge brokers have highlighted the complexity of today's policymaking, characterized by new modes of governance and the evolution of knowledge brokers—particularly international organizations—in an era of evidence-based policymaking. The transition from government to governance has brought about a significant shift in the way education policies are developed, implemented, and assessed. This shift invited different groups, such as NGOs and private actors, beyond traditional government bodies into decision-making and dispersed power and authority among various actors and organizations (Ball, 2012). New modes of governance are thus often characterized as decentralized, horizontal, and post-bureaucratic (Bromley, 2016; Maroy, 2012; Ozga, 2009). In the global space, governance also involves and interacts with international organizations, multinational corporations, and foreign government entities. In particular, the influence of inter-governmental organizations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank on global education governance is noteworthy because of their role and capacity in producing knowledge and disseminating it to governments through their expertise-sharing, policy advisory, and consultation mechanisms (Seitzer et al., 2023; Steiner-Khamisi et al., 2024a). They become part of the institutionalized policy process, which has traditionally been solely within the government's domain (Baek, 2022a). This is accompanied by greater emphasis on data and numbers, that is, “governing by numbers” (Grek, 2009), which allows policy actors to self-regulate through comparison (Ozga, 2009). International large-scale assessments, such as the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), exemplify this trend, drawing on numerical data and performance indicators to inform or justify policy decisions. They allow policy actors to selectively use indicators and attach their own political meaning to them. This reliance on data has permeated discourse and decision-making processes within and beyond state boundaries, underlining the need for “evidence”-based policy development and evaluation. Given the surplus of publicly accessible information in the digital age, including that of evidence, the term “Governance by Numbers 2.0” has been extensively proposed as a

synonym for knowledge brokerage in the digital age (Steiner-Khamisi et al., 2024b).

However, the participation of diverse actors in the policy process led to competition for knowledge within the education sectors. It has been extensively discussed that there is a “surplus of evidence” (Lubienski, 2019) to an extent that there is “information pollution” (Malin & Lubienski, 2022), as discussed in Chapter 8 of this book. Policymakers often experience difficulties in accessing the quality of information and navigating numerous sources (Cairney, 2016). In this context, the role of knowledge brokers becomes increasingly vital as they act as bridges, transferring knowledge across geographical, institutional, and systemic boundaries in the policy process.

Each chapter of this book extensively reviewed the literature on knowledge brokering, knowledge translation, knowledge mobilization, and research evidence uptake. Indeed, the literature on knowledge brokerage and brokering in education has revealed a diverse landscape characterized by several major themes. Rycroft-Smith (2022), for example, conducted a narrative literature review and found that there are (1) various terms and concepts used within the field, often without clear distinctions; (2) different models and metaphors, such as mediation, straddling, boundary spanning, and matchmaking, illustrating the roles of knowledge brokers in education; and (3) various frameworks developed to characterize, evaluate, and measure knowledge brokering in education. In addition, evaluation and accountability emerge as crucial focal points within the literature, highlighting the importance of assessing the effectiveness of knowledge-brokering initiatives and holding brokers responsible for their impact and integrity.

## KNOWLEDGE BROKERS IN GLOBAL EDUCATION GOVERNANCE

In relation to current research trends in knowledge brokerage and global governance, each chapter of this book makes a meaningful contribution and further extends the discussion. They point to the increased importance of knowledge brokers in shaping global education agendas, going beyond traditional boundaries, and encompassing a diverse range of actors, from intergovernmental organizations to private entities, while casting a critical spotlight on the cycle of exclusion and hegemony in global education discourse.

A central aspect of knowledge brokers highlighted throughout the chapters is the evolving role of knowledge brokers. From adept communicators who bridge the gap between researchers and policymakers to boundary spanners, the spectrum of brokers demonstrates the blurred boundaries and complexities within the roles of knowledge producers, brokers, and users in the knowledge-brokering processes (see Steiner-Khamisi, Chapter 1). However, beneath this diversity lies a subtle inequality wherein certain actors wield greater influence in setting agendas, shaping policy priorities, producing research and data, and promoting certain knowledge exchange and lesson-drawing mechanisms. Indeed, intergovernmental organizations, such as the World Bank, OECD, and IDRC, have strategically contributed to knowledge brokerage with their knowledge production, management, and dissemination strategies (see Baek, Chapter 2; Ward and Moutaana, Chapter 3; Wind and López, Chapter 6). However, there are also complexities and challenges associated with these processes, including issues of power dynamics, limited and underutilized resources, and insufficient contextualization.

In addition to intergovernmental organizations, private, non-state actors have also emerged as influential knowledge brokers in recent years. Kembou and Dimovska (Chapter 4) present how the Education Evidence Labs, an initiative established by the Jacobs Foundation, have aimed to support the use of evidence in national policymaking and implementation with their partners from the Global North and the Global South. In contrast, Lubienski et al. (Chapter 8) offer a more critical viewpoint on the role of private, non-state actors in evidence-based policymaking. The case of school vouchers in the United States demonstrates how private actors package and promote research evidence, regardless of its quality, to advance particular agendas, such as school vouchers. It raises questions about the integrity and objectivity of knowledge brokerage in an era marked by the privatization and commodification of knowledge.

Amidst the rise of knowledge brokers, such as intergovernmental organizations and non-state actors, globally, the need to closely examine and consider the national contexts and needs that shape knowledge use in educational policy, planning, and implementation has been a recurrent theme. Levin et al. (Chapter 7), for example, demonstrate the importance of strategic prioritization in research activities reflecting specific national needs by analyzing the utilization of research evidence in educational policy and planning decisions in Kyrgyzstan and Moldova. Their findings echo what has been discussed extensively in the international education community, which challenges Western-centric

knowledge paradigms and highlights the importance of local experts and locally relevant knowledge in knowledge brokerage. Faul et al. (Chapter 5) point out significant homogenization in evidence-use studies, which may both stem from and contribute to the marginalization of diverse perspectives and understandings of what counts as evidence and who can produce it. This also reflects systemic inequalities in knowledge production and mobilization, particularly those that exist between the Global North and the Global South. Despite systemic inequalities, the concept of “evidence-based” policy, which naively assumes the apolitical nature of evidence and the linearity of policymaking, is often adopted without critical examination or reflection in the policy process, thus necessitating “skepticism about the discourse of ‘evidence’” (Elfert, Chapter 10).

## PROPOSED AGENDA FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

In this edited book, we invited a wide range of noted authors to discuss and reflect on knowledge brokerage, some of whom are situated in academia or think tanks and others in organizations that engage in knowledge brokering. The diversity of experts contributing to this important topic is attributable to the design of the book. As a result, this book, in and of itself, functions as a knowledge broker between two communities that do not sufficiently communicate with and learn from each other: those that study and those that do knowledge brokerage. Several chapters also hint at gaps in research that require further investigation, as we now discuss.

First, how does the use of research evidence in education differ from that in other sectors? Note that evidence and expertise are closely related, as it is oftentimes experts who are tasked with producing evidence. However, this relationship is not as closely knit in education as in other sectors. In particular, the education system has to cope with three predicaments: an endemic, non-resolvable one; one that deserves further debate and action; and one that we have to accept as it is even though many of us find it somewhat humiliating. The unresolvable dilemma is the so-called “technology deficit” in education (Luhmann & Schorr, 1979, p. 120): education systems attempt to prepare students for the future, but they do so in the present, not knowing what the future will bring. Thus, at the end of the day, preparing students for twenty-first-century skills involves, undoubtedly, exercises that are noteworthy but ultimately speculative (e.g., calculating human capital or projecting the future economic productivity of individuals based on health, educational attainment, and school

performance). The second predicament that deserves more pondering is related to the inclusionary feature of educational expertise. Steiner-Khamisi (Chapter 1) writes about the democratization of expertise in education: everybody has an opinion, derived from personal experience and cultural beliefs, of what “good education” is. This is radically different in other sectors, ranging from the health sector to, for example, the aviation sector, where only select, trained specialists are entitled to consider themselves experts. As a result, the “truth” about good education is not beyond contestation, and “evidence” does not hold a sacrosanct status. In contrast, the authority and, by extension, the credibility of evidence need to be first established and then convincingly communicated. To use a Foucauldian term, constant public contestation over “discursive power” is a matter that should not be underestimated in education. Therefore, who has the authority to establish credible evidence and which features (the methods used, the funding sources available, or the societal impact) enhance the authorization of evidence are some key questions in the education sector. Knowledge producers are, of course, well aware of the particular challenges in this sector. Unsurprisingly, they forge networks with both like-minded partners and intermediaries that have access to epistemic communities that are somewhat removed from them. In other words, intermediaries or knowledge brokers are more important in the education sector than in any other sector for not only communicating but also adding credence to research evidence. Furthermore, networking with like-minded and distant organizations creates an echo chamber that amplifies an organization’s belief while securing a quasi-external stamp of scientific approval for the evidence produced and the actions taken (see Steiner-Khamisi, 2012). The third predicament is related to the somewhat humiliating case-making habits in the education sector. How many more times do educational researchers need to prove that education is good for economic growth, health, political participation, women’s liberation, and ultimately for world peace? A large body of evidence in education is designed to build political coalitions and mobilize financial resources to justify the need for universal access and quality education. Are these ultimately not political decisions regarding how much funding and support is allocated to the education sector? Considerable evidence in the education sector is produced for convincing decision-makers at large. At the expense of reiterating the comparison here, it is common sense that universal health and regulation of the aviation sector are required regardless of what is happening in other sectors. What exactly is it that

makes education so dependent and therefore vulnerable compared to other sectors?

Second, there are not enough studies on evidence uptake in the education sector. The 2024 UNESCO study has helped problematize and specify the reasons for the limited uptake of research evidence in policy, planning, and practice (Steiner-Khamsi et al., 2024a; see Baek, Chapter 2). However, there is a need to dig much deeper into the “recipient side” of the science–politics divide: when do decision-makers seek evidence, which expertise-seeking arrangements do political systems have in place, and what are the pathways in the use of research evidence (Baek, 2022b). Studies in public policy yield important insights on national policy styles (Howlett & Tosun, 2019), whereas the literature in political science sheds light on ad hoc commissions and other expertise-seeking arrangements (Weingart, 2003). Finally, comparative education policy is currently experiencing a burgeoning scholarship on factors that increase uptake of research evidence in policy, planning, and practice, as evidenced in the collection of contributions in this book.

Finally, the world of international cooperation in education is crowded with international organizations that seek impact through knowledge brokerage. How does an individual organization make itself heard and stand out? What other strategies do organizations use—besides money (through funding) and voice (through networking)—to differentiate themselves from other intermediaries? From a comparative policy studies perspective, the questions of how organizational brokerage strategies have changed over time and whether there is convergence or divergence over time are crucial. However, time needs to pass for a retrospective analysis that would allow us to assess in which direction international organizations have moved their brokerage styles and approaches.

## NOTE

1. Our research on knowledge brokerage in education policy greatly benefited from participation in the five-country, multi-year study Policy Knowledge and Lesson Drawing in Nordic School Reform in an Era of International Comparison (POLNET), funded by the Research Council of Norway (NRC - 283467). The Principal Investigator was Kirsten Sivesind, University of Oslo.

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