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**GLOBAL
EDUCATION
POLICY, IMPACT
EVALUATIONS, AND
ALTERNATIVES**

The Political Economy of
Knowledge Production

D. Brent Edwards Jr.



Global Education Policy, Impact Evaluations, and Alternatives

“Edwards provides an invaluable case study into how the World Bank produces ‘policy-based evidence’—rather than ‘evidence-based policy’—to reinforce its neo-liberal bias. His detailed work on education policy in El Salvador exposes how the World Bank’s purportedly scientific and neutral ‘impact evaluations’ are anything but.”

—Robin Broad, *Professor, American University and John Simon Guggenheim Fellow*

“Through an impressive blend of theoretical and empirical analyses, Edwards carefully and critically scrutinises what has typically been taken as a ‘technical’ and ‘neutral’ mechanism in the field of educational aid—i.e., impact evaluation—and demonstrates the breadth and depth of its consequences as a tool of educational governance at the national and international levels. This major, original and important book represents a significant contribution to knowledge about the intersection of impact evaluation and educational aid.”

—Roger Dale, *Professor, University of Bristol*

“Brent Edwards skillfully employs a multi-level, political economy approach to critically analyzing the agenda-setting role of the World Bank. His study of EDUCO (Education with Community Participation) in El Salvador convincingly documents the importance of in-depth studies of the historical and sociocultural contexts in which reforms arise and are then extended to other countries. By situating this global reform within a comprehensive financial-political-intellectual complex, he deftly critiques the seemingly rigorous and objective econometric studies that served as the basis for global policy promotion of EDUCO, while offering more appropriate research approaches that provide insight as to who benefits from what educational interventions.”

—Robert F. Arnove, *Chancellor’s Professor Emeritus of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies Indiana University, Bloomington*

D. Brent Edwards Jr.

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The Political Economy of Knowledge Production

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macmillan

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PREFACE

This book was written to extend a previous work by the author and in hopes of making a contribution to how we understand knowledge production—but particularly the production and role of impact evaluations—in the field of global education policy. While the empirical case presented here has been addressed in previous publications, for example, a journal article in *Education Policy Analysis Archives* in 2016 with Claudia Loucel, those publications did not sufficiently address theoretical or methodological issues. This book thus seeks to fill these gaps by spelling out more fully (a) what it means to view knowledge production in the field of global education policy from a political economy perspective, (b) what it means to critically review impact evaluations, (c) what it means to place a critical review of impact evaluations within the political economy of global education reform, and (d) what methods can be used for carrying out such a study. The goal is to help shed light on knowledge production methods that are often seen as objective and neutral but which in reality contribute to serving certain interests while marginalizing others.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACE	Community Education Association (<i>Asociación Comunal Educativa</i>)
ARENA	Republican National Alliance (<i>Allianza Republicana Nacional</i>)
EDUCO	Education with Community Participation (<i>Educación con Participación de la Comunidad</i>)
FEPADE	Business Fund for Educational Development
FMLN	Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (<i>Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional</i>)
FUSADES	Salvadoran Foundation for Economic and Social Development
MINED	Ministry of Education
NGO	Non-governmental organization
OLS	Ordinary least squares
RCT	Randomized control trial
SDU	Standard deviation unit
UNESCO	United Nations Education, Science, and Culture Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

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CHAPTER 1

A Political Economy Perspective on Knowledge Production

Abstract This chapter delineates what it means to bring a political economy lens to the issue of knowledge production within the field of global education policy. In addition to characterizing this perspective generally, this chapter addresses knowledge production in relation to the World Bank, one of the most influential knowledge-producing organizations in this field and the organization at the center of the empirical case presented in this book. Both the material and ideational dimensions of the World Bank's influence are discussed. Beyond these issues, this chapter also (a) defines and characterizes impact evaluation; (b) discusses the purpose, argument, and contribution of this book; (c) provides background information on the policy case from El Salvador that serves as the book's empirical basis; and (d) situates this book in relation to previous work by the author.

Keywords International organizations • Political economy • Impact evaluations • World Bank • Global education policy • Knowledge production

Since World War II data collection, research, and recommendations for policy in education have depended, to a significant extent, on international organizations. These agencies have had the resources, scope, and sometimes the vision to collect data on a large scale and to set education policy.
(Altbach, 1988, p. 137)

[There is] a new political economy of knowledge production and use in educational coalitions. In this environment, there are advantages for organizations that can more effectively package and promote research, can orchestrate a concerted effort to convey a consistent message through multiple media outlets, and can place it in front of key people in the policy pipeline. [Intermediary organizations] have demonstrated a notable ability to succeed in this climate.
 (DeBray, Scott, Lubinski, & Jabbar, 2014, p. 179)

INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS, KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION, AND GLOBAL EDUCATION POLICY

It has long been acknowledged that international organizations are influential when it comes to the reform of education policy around the world (Altbach, 1988; Berman, 1979, 1992).¹ More recently, scholarship has highlighted that many of these organizations, beyond having the resources to collect data on a large scale, also use those resources to produce attractive knowledge products, to widely disseminate them, and even to deliver them directly to policymakers (DeBray et al., 2014; Verger, Edwards, & Kosar-Altinyelken, 2014). Importantly, what these observations underscore is that international organizations—or any intermediary organization that produces knowledge about policies and practice to inform decision-making—both derive and generate their influence in material and ideational terms. That is, the power of international organizations comes, on one hand, from access to significant financial and organizational resources and, on the other hand, from the ability to strategically employ those resources to promote certain ideas or policies and to shape the conversation around what kinds of reform are seen as desirable within the global education policy field (Barnett & Finnemore, 2005; Jakobi, 2009).

What the above comments presuppose is the combination of a few key assumptions that should be clarified because they are fundamental to the way that a political economy perspective understands the intersection of international organizations, knowledge production, and the field of global education policy.² That is, the opening comments and the remainder of this book depart from a number of precepts that should be stated unambiguously because they serve as the conceptual point of departure for the methodological approach and the particular findings offered here. The first assumption is that each international organization is animated by

certain ideas, policies, or values more so than by others, with these ideas, related to the mission of the organization and to the preferences of those in leadership positions (Allison & Zelikow, 1999; Haas, 1990). Second, international organizations, like all organizations, scan their environments and look for ways to ensure stability (Malen & Knapp, 1997). Third, for organizations that rely to a greater or lesser extent on the ability to sell, mobilize, or produce ideas or knowledge products (e.g., research or other analytic work), stability results from the perceived relevance of those ideas (as judged by others) and the need for those knowledge products within the larger political context (Porter, 1995). This dual orientation toward organizational survival and political salience makes sense when one considers that international organizations—which range from non-governmental organizations (NGOs), to philanthropic foundations, to think tanks, to corporate entities, to bilateral agencies and to multilateral institutions—are not simply reactive features of the global education policy field but are also political actors in their own right. They are actors that operate on one or more levels from the global to the local to influence a range of ideational issues, such as which problems, policies, programs, and so on, are seen as warranting attention, with the goal being to preserve organizational longevity into the future by demonstrating the relevance of the organization to those problems, policies, programs, and so on (Altbach, 1988; Ball, 2012; Berman, 1992; Salas-Porras & Murray, 2017). These three assumptions thus highlight the interdependence among the political, organizational, and ideational factors that international organizations must manage, to the extent possible, to survive in the world of global education reform.³

The issues raised above are at the heart of the political economy perspective on the connections among international organizations, knowledge production, and the politics of global education policy. However, in operating from a political economy perspective, it is important to further draw attention to a fourth factor, namely, the variegated nature of the field of global education policy. This factor highlights the fact that the political economy perspective analyzes the dynamics highlighted above in relation to (a) the uneven topography of this field of activity as states respond differently to the pressures of globalization (Lingard & Rawolle, 2011) and to (b) the competition among actors that occurs as organizations strive for increased legitimacy and influence (Edwards, Okitsu, da Costa, & Kitamura, 2018; Mundy & Ghali, 2009). Additionally, and fundamentally, the political economy perspective is sensitive to (c) the way that the field

of global education policy is overlaid on, is intertwined with, and must respond to other structural considerations that often mediate the relationship between global educational actors and opportunities at the national level through which these actors can influence educational policies and programs (Hay, 2002). These structural considerations can relate to supranational constraints (as with World Trade Organization regulations), regional bodies and accords, free trade agreements among countries, intercountry political relationships, or intra-country political dynamics. When it comes to the ways that the global education policy field interacts with larger structural considerations, the point is that, first, the relationship between international organizations and national actors is shaped by a variety of circumstances and, second, that we cannot think of this relationship between global and national actors in isolation, separate from the kinds of structural issues mentioned above.

Taking the aforementioned assumptions as a starting point, the task at hand in this book is to contribute to how we understand and investigate the role and influence of knowledge production by international organizations within the field of global education reform. This opening section has taken a first step in that direction by spelling out what it means to bring a political economy lens to this issue. However, as the title of this book indicates, the interest here is to go beyond a general focus on knowledge production to examine a particular kind of knowledge production, that is, the production of impact evaluations (discussed further below). Moreover, as will become clear, the end goal is not only to unpack the methodological, technical, political, and organizational challenges in the production of impact evaluations (as discussed in Chap. 2) but also to detail an approach to critically understanding and examining the role that impact evaluations, once produced, play within the political economy of global education reform (discussed in Chap. 3). The final two goals are to demonstrate the application of this approach in relation to a global education policy from El Salvador (Chaps. 5, 6) and to reflect on the implications of this case for ways forward, methodologically and otherwise (see Chap. 7).

Before moving on to focus on these goals, the present chapter sets the stage by addressing a number of key issues. Due to its centrality in the policy case from El Salvador, the first section characterizes the role of the World Bank within the field of global education in relation to knowledge production. The second section below defines and characterizes impact evaluations. Subsequent sections (a) discuss the purpose, argument, and contribution of this book, (b) provide background information on the

policy case from El Salvador, and (c) situate this book in relation to previous work by the author.

THE WORLD BANK AND KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

As noted above, there are many kinds of international organizations operating in the realm of education reform globally. However, in the post-WWII period, when it comes to impact on education reform around the world, arguably the most influential organizations have been multilateral institutions, including the United Nations agencies and multilateral development banks. Though the organizations in this group often compete among themselves for influence (Edwards et al., 2018), the institution with the most sway from the 1970s to the 2010s has been the World Bank (or simply “the Bank”) (Mundy, 1998; Mundy & Verger, 2015).⁴

As the primary institution of interest in this book (due to its centrality in the case of focus), it is helpful to briefly characterize the World Bank. Consider, for example, that, by the 1970s, the World Bank was not only the “largest single provider of finance for educational development” (Mundy, 1998, pp. 466–467) but also that, by 1970, World Bank lending to education, at \$409 million, already outstripped the total regular budgets of both the United Nations Education, Science, and Culture Organization (UNESCO, \$355 million) and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF, \$51million) combined (Mundy, 1998, p. 459). By 1995, education sector lending from the World Bank reached \$2 billion (Mundy, 1998, p. 467), a with lending figures still at this level in 2012 (Mundy & Verger, 2015) (having peaked at approximately \$4 billion in 2004, World Bank/IEG, 2006).⁵

Importantly, though, World Bank influence stems from more than just its lending abilities and the ability to make loan disbursement conditional on stipulated educational reforms. As “the largest development research institution in the world” (Gilbert & Vines, 2006, p. 49), it also produces hundreds of knowledge products each year, including reports, academic articles and books, impact evaluations, working papers, seminar proceedings, and policy briefs. Indeed, between 1998 and 2005 alone, the Bank “undertook 705 research projects and published 3635 research publications in English” (Dethier, 2007, p. 471). When it comes to research on education specifically, the Bank has been similarly prolific. In a 2011 publication, the World Bank boasts of its contribution to the “global knowledge base” on education through the production of approximately 500

journal articles and 500 books, book chapters, and working papers (p. 52; see also Zapp, 2017). It furthermore claims that “only Harvard University comes close” to matching its contribution to the economics of education (p. 53). Of course, it needs to be remembered that the material and ideational aspects of influence go hand in hand, for during 2001–2010 alone the education sector at the World Bank spent \$49 million dollars on research to produce “about 280 pieces of research and other analytical work” (p. 52).

Importantly, the above characterization does not touch on the many other ways that the World Bank collects data on education around the world, such as through its recent initiative known as SABER or the Systems Approach for Better Education Results. Through this initiative, the World Bank seeks “to collect and analyze information on policies and identify actionable priorities for strengthening education systems” (World Bank, 2013, p. 4), with the goal being to “make it possible for stakeholders to obtain simple, objective, up-to-date snapshots of how their system is functioning, how well it is performing, and what concretely the system can do to achieve measurably better results” (World Bank, 2011, p. 61). By collecting information on numerous aspects of education systems around the world, the World Bank endeavors to create a “global knowledge base on education policies and institutions” in order to provide evidence-based guidance to countries on education reform (World Bank, 2013, p. 4).

One implication of the fact that the World Bank acts as “knowledge bank”—by collecting data and producing research on such a scale (Samoff & Stromquist, 2001; Zapp, 2017)—is that it can influence which reforms are seen as legitimate and desirable, through its ability to elevate and promote its research in strategic ways within the global governance of education. Verger (2012) has shown how Bank staff do this in reference to the policy of public-private partnerships, while Stone (2002) has shown how the World Bank has strategically contributed to the Global Development Network (a transnational non-governmental organization that focuses on creating, sharing, and applying international development knowledge) to promote research on open economies and free markets. Interestingly, recent research has also shown that, as a result of the ubiquity, credibility, and perceived usefulness of World Bank research, actors in the field of global education policy have come to rely on it, to the point where they look for it and feel uncomfortable without it, even in spaces of consultation designed to be open to other perspectives on education governance and reform (Verger, Edwards, & Kosar-Altinyelken, 2014).

Of course, an important aspect of the production of knowledge for development (like other forms of knowledge) is that it is not free from bias (Cox, 2002) and that its valuation is not free from the prevailing norms or standards of quality (Walters, Lareau, & Ranis, 2009). Indeed, the production of knowledge suffers from bias and political considerations in many ways and on many levels—for example, in terms of how data are collected (including which categories and terms to use in labeling data) and subsequently interpreted (since data never speak for themselves but are always viewed through some lens; Porter, 1995). Within organizations, although they are contested sites where multiple perspectives may vie for supremacy, and as such may not have a consistent message or ideology (though this is unlikely or uncommon, particularly for organizations that successfully brand themselves as reflecting certain perspectives), the fact remains that organizations which traffic in knowledge production must take a stance on those issues about which they produce knowledge (even if their stance is not to take a stance). The positions or approaches advocated by an organization will tend to reflect the dominant perspective in that organization or will otherwise reflect a perspective that is acceptable or non-threatening to that organization's survival (Allison & Zelikow, 1999; Malen & Knapp, 1997; Malin & Lubienski, 2015).

Moreover, in terms of prevailing norms around research standards, to the extent that an organization seeks to be taken seriously, it will conform with the expectations related to quality. For decades, the standard for quality, rigor, and relevancy in policy research has been quantitative forms of evaluation (Klees & Edwards, 2014). The specific form of quantitative analysis that passes as most rigorous has changed over time and has become more sophisticated in its search for the ability to identify the true effect of policies and programs (see Chap. 2 for more). Nevertheless, the issue remains that there are prevailing expectations around methods for knowledge production, and organizations that desire to participate in policy debates or to influence policy trends will employ those methods that will help them gain or retain credibility (Lubienski, Scott, & DeBray, 2014).

Scholars have addressed the issue of bias in relation to the World Bank, pointing out that this institution, at its core, is guided by a neoliberal worldview and that the research it produces reflects that worldview by promoting policies and reforms based in market or quasi-market principles (Broad, 2006; Klees & Edwards, 2014; Lauglo, 1996; Rao & Woolcock, 2007). That is, while the World Bank frames its findings and the policies it recommends as the product of scientific inquiry guided by the highest