



Emerging Scholars

Global Assemblages and National Narratives: A Critical Rethinking of Evidence-Based Policymaking in the Nordic School Reforms

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Abstract

This article builds on the author's doctoral dissertation and the accompanying *lectio praecursoria*, offering a critical reflection on evidence-based policymaking in Nordic school reforms. Drawing on assemblage thinking and spatiotemporal theory, it explores how global policy discourses and national ambitions are interwoven through networks of experts and knowledge. The article highlights the contested and co-constructed nature of evidence-based policymaking, shaped by multiple actors and sites in national, Nordic and global policy spheres. It argues for a nuanced and relational understanding of policy space—one that enables researchers to trace sites and situations of policymaking and identify potential moments of interruption. These ideas are further developed in the author's current postdoctoral project, which follows future vision for comprehensive education in the making in Finland.

Keywords: globalisation, evidence-based policymaking, school reform, policy transfer, Nordic countries

Contested Evidence and the Globalisation of Education Policymaking: Situating the Study

The idea of evidence-based policymaking has become central to education policy and politics, as education



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is increasingly perceived as closely tied to the social and economic development of modern nation-states (Wiseman, 2010). Grek (2013) argues that knowledge has become such a central element in education policymaking that it now constitutes the policy itself, rather than merely informing it. Previous research has shown that especially numerical data and comparative indicators carry significant weight as evidence (Steiner-Khamsi, 2012). As a result, international organisations that produce such data—most notably the OECD—have gained considerable influence (Martens, 2007). Despite lacking formal authority over sovereign states, these organisations exert substantial influence through soft power (Lawn & Grek, 2012). This form of power, grounded in the appeal of persuasive policy ideas, creates a space that attracts various actors—including national policymakers—to engage and operate within it (Lawn & Grek, 2012). Consequently, national actors not only adopt and translate these ideas within their national contexts, but also actively contribute to their development when engaging in global settings (Beech & Artopoulos, 2016). Hence, the question of evidence and expertise in education policymaking and politics is increasingly entangled in the interconnected and complex power dynamics of a global scale, as well as the worldwide harmonisation of education policies—traditionally a domain of national governance (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). This shift, driven by a worldwide convergence of reform ideas and the influence of international organisations, has sparked debates among education policy researchers about who controls education reforms, how national and international actors interact, and how national policymaking should be understood and studied within a globally interconnected policy space (Mundy et al., 2016).

This paper is based on my doctoral dissertation, *Global Dynamics and Emerging Spaces: Expert Power, Policy Assemblages, and Evidence-Based Policymaking in Nordic School Reforms*, defended at the University of Helsinki in June 2024 (Volmari, 2024). It draws from the short lecture (*lectio praecursoria*) delivered at the public defence. In this article, I discuss the theoretical and methodological choices, key findings, and the broader implications of my dissertation for education policy research. By examining evidence-based policymaking and expert power in Nordic comprehensive education reforms, the study contributed to ongoing debates on the globalisation of education and the role of expertise and evidence in shaping school reforms—and, by extension, educational futures.

My interest in globalisation and education, like that of many PhD researchers, was shaped by personal experiences—particularly my extended time living abroad. When I first moved internationally, Finland was relatively unknown. However, this changed around the turn of the millennium while I was pursuing a master's degree in educational sciences at the University of Amsterdam. At that time, Finland gained global prominence following the release of the first PISA results. This visibility was further amplified by Nokia's success in the mobile phone market, creating a dual image of Finland as a leader in both education and technology.

The release of the PISA results triggered a “PISA shock” across Europe, as countries like Germany fell short of expectations (Waldow, 2009). As a result, my identity shifted—I became an informal ambassador for Finnish educational success. People were eager to understand the Finnish miracle: why its schools excelled and what lessons could be applied elsewhere. However, as Finland’s PISA performance began to decline, I found myself representing a different narrative—one of caution. At a recent conference, an attendee at a symposium where I was presenting asked me to explain in detail the decline of the Finnish education model, seeking insights into how their own country might avoid a similar fate.

These experiences illustrate how global rankings like PISA shape perceptions of national progress and create distinctive identities for individuals representing those nations. They also highlight what is often expected from comparative education researchers. When we use examples from multiple countries, we are frequently asked to compare them against each other and reveal who is doing best in the global education race. In the dissertation, I investigated how evidence and expertise shape educational reforms in Finland, Iceland, and Norway. Rather than seeking to identify the best practises, my research focused on how policies are assembled to appear coherent and rational, with particular attention to how global influences are woven into national policymaking processes. This analysis drew on Massey’s (2005) concept of ‘space/time,’ Sassen’s (2007) sociological theory of globalisation, and assemblage thinking, particularly as developed by Deleuze and Guattari (1987), to explore the complex entanglements of knowledge, expertise, and reform.

Beyond Dichotomies: Methods, Theory and Findings

An important debate in comparative education revolves around methodological questions—particularly methodological nationalism, which views the nation-state as the natural and logical starting point for societal and political analysis (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002). More recently, researchers have begun to pay attention to methodological globalism (Takayama & Lingard, 2021), which is akin to the grand narrative of globalisation that frames globalisation as a force that overwhelms and overrides national sovereignty (Bayly et al., 2006). Drawing on research in education policy transfer, globalisation studies, spatiotemporal theory, and assemblage thinking, I developed this study around a nuanced understanding of policy context. This understanding is informed by Sobe and Kowalczyk’s (2018) concept of big ‘C’ Context, which argues that context should not be viewed as static or fixed, but rather as a “process of interweaving” (p. 197), where objects and contexts interact and acquire meaning (Sobe & Kowalczyk, 2012).

Building on this conceptualisation of *Context* and aiming to address the limitations of methodological nationalism and globalism, I employed multiple methods: expert interviews, qualitative content analysis of key policy documents, bibliometric analysis, and social network analysis. The methodological choices were

designed to move beyond simplistic dichotomies between national, Nordic, and global spheres, and to capture the complexities of the policy processes under investigation, as suggested by Simola and colleagues (2017).

The study was grounded in three primary theoretical perspectives. First, space is not merely a flat surface marked by geographical boundaries; it is shaped by social relations. We bring our histories, experiences, and relationships into any space we inhabit. Thus, nation-states, regions, and the world are not just lines on a map—they represent “the meeting up of histories” (Massey, 2005, p. 4). Second, globalisation is not an abstract, omnipotent force that eclipses national sovereignty. Rather, it is a project in which nationally appointed actors play crucial roles. Building on Massey (2005) and Sassen (2007), it becomes clear that local contexts contribute to what is commonly recognised as global. Sassen (2013) argues that the global and the national are not mutually exclusive, urging researchers to examine “multiple national conditions and dynamics that are likely to be engaged with global and often are global as it functions inside the national” (p. 33). This perspective broadens the research focus to include how national actors engage in global politics from within their national contexts. As Beech and Artopoulos (2016) highlight, national experts in education policymaking contribute to the creation of global policy scripts and discourses and promote them within their respective national settings. Third, policy formulation is not a linear, rational process dominated solely by state actors. It is a dynamic process (Taylor et al., 1997), involving competing actors and diverse forms of knowledge (Cairney, 2016), and should be understood as an assemblage—woven together through unified ideas of progress and orchestrated by global power structures and international organisations, such as the OECD, that seek to standardise education globally and ensure their own strategic relevance (Thompson et al., 2021).

This dissertation comprised three sub-studies that investigated globalisation, school reforms, and evidence-based policymaking through distinct analytical lenses and spatial perspectives. The first sub-study (Volmari, Kauko et al., 2022) analysed the sources of evidence and expertise cited during Finland’s 2014 National Core Curriculum Reform, focusing on the renewal of national objectives and the distribution of lesson hours. The study examined ten key policy documents and 677 references, categorising them by the country in which the cited publications were published. Results showed that 76% of the references were published in Finland, with a high degree of self-referentiality: many citations originated from the National Agency for Education, the Ministry of Education and Culture, or affiliated authors. PISA results were frequently referenced, but often through Finnish-language publications rather than direct OECD sources. OECD materials appeared more prominently in reform proposals than in the documents informing them. These findings supported prior research suggesting that international data are often selectively mobilised to legitimise contested reforms (Steiner-Khamsi, 2012).

The second sub-study (Volmari, Sivesind et al., 2022) examined the role of Nordic knowledge and cooperation in education policymaking. Despite active regional collaboration, references to other Nordic countries accounted for only 2–7% of citations in the analysed policy documents. OECD data held greater legitimising authority, while Nordic knowledge was more informal and context dependent. Interviews with 18 policymakers in Finland, Iceland, and Norway revealed that Nordic meetings primarily served as informal arenas for idea exchange. However, in global forums such as the OECD meetings, Nordic actors often acted as a coalition, strategically leveraging their shared identity to advance national agendas.

The third sub-study (Volmari, 2022) explored the global networks of nationally appointed policymakers in Finland and Norway. Drawing on eleven expert interviews, the study conceptualised these actors as policy translators who mediate between global and national arenas. The findings highlighted that policy ideas were not simply transferred but co-constructed through these actors' interpretive work. Access to global policy venues was shaped by national performance in international assessments—particularly PISA—which influenced countries' visibility and participation. This dynamic is likely to reinforce the appeal of PISA and incentivise engagement in global policy processes.

Collectively, the three sub-studies revealed a policy landscape in which national, regional, and global elements were deeply intertwined (Volmari, 2024). Rather than a top-down imposition, globalisation emerged as a co-constructed process, with nationally appointed experts playing a central role in disseminating and translating policy discourses to fit national narratives. The findings challenged the notion of objective, evidence-based policymaking, demonstrating that evidence was selectively integrated into policy narratives through complex negotiations across multiple levels and expert networks. This underscored the inherently political nature of what is often framed as neutral, evidence-based school reform.

Implications and future pathways

What is the relevance of my findings? Why is it important not just to accept claims that political decisions and policies are evidence-based, but to dig deeper into what kind of evidence counts—and who produces this knowledge?

First, because school reforms are fundamentally about educational progress. As Doreen Massey—whose work has been a cornerstone of this dissertation—puts it:

What is more, there is only one historical queue, one model of development. Furthermore, it's one defined by those in the lead, the most powerful voices, the ones who designed the queue in the first place. Now, let me be clear about one thing here: I am absolutely not trying to argue against any notions of progress or development. Clean water is indubitably better than dirty water. What I do want to raise is, firstly, the

possibility of different ways of progressing. And secondly, and probably in the end even more importantly, the question of who gets to decide (in Allen et al., 2022).

In my dissertation, I primarily addressed the second point Massey raises: Who gets to decide what counts as progress in education? Who holds the power, and how does that power operate through the evidence-based paradigm in education policymaking and politics?

Second, school reforms are not just about what should be taught in schools and how—they also produce and maintain normative assumptions of the ideal child, teacher, and school. As my study shows, the knowledge used as evidence in school reforms is often quantitative and based on standardised indicators of learning outcomes. This is understandable, as policies must simplify both the problem and the solution to suggest improvements. Nevertheless, such simplification is not without consequences. Education policies do not merely reflect reality—they create new realities (Gorur, 2016). They define what is considered good education and construct the images of the ideal student and school (Popkewitz, 2000). Often, the knowledge used as evidence for policies focuses on standardised and measurable qualities in individuals, imagined serving the global competition between nations (Gorur, 2016). I argue that this narrows our imaginaries of ourselves and others and limits our ability to envision alternative futures.

Third, viewing space as social and relational, and policies as assemblages, opens new possibilities for intervention in comparative education (Volmari, 2024). My dissertation illustrated how numerical indicators—interpreted by experts—are aligned with national policy ambitions and embedded in evidence-based policymaking, reinforcing dominant narratives that construct normative ideals of education and the future. These processes often reduce individuals to ‘human doings’ rather than recognising them as ‘human beings’ (Volmari, 2024, p. 86). Drawing on Baker and McGuirk (2017), I used assemblage thinking to trace the multiple sites and situations where policy assemblages take form and suggested in the conclusions that this approach may also help identify interruptions and open space for alternative educational truths, beyond the commodification of education. In my postdoctoral project, *Vision and Guidelines for the Future of Comprehensive Education*, I can further develop these ideas by following policy in formation. Unlike my dissertation, which examined a past reform, this project traces the ongoing development of a future vision for Finnish comprehensive education towards 2045. It brings together a wide range of experts across Finnish society and is led by the Ministry of Education and Culture. Through longitudinal interviews and ethnographic observations in the various sites and situations where the vision is shaped, I aim to advance both the spatiotemporal reading and the assemblage methodology.

Much has already been done within the research community to resist reductive logic and raise concerns about the commodification of education. Yet, in the face of escalating global challenges, we may need to take an even more active role—not only in analysing and critiquing, but also in shaping more just, humane,

and sustainable futures. This includes reimagining the purpose of education in ways that serve all humans and non-humans equally. Building on the spatiotemporal reading and assemblage thinking developed in my dissertation, my postdoctoral project contributes to these efforts by tracing the complexities of policy formation and highlighting potential moments of interruption for researchers following policy in the making.

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