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UNESCO's Global Governance in the School Education: A Scoping Review†

Gobernanza Global de la UNESCO en la Educación Escolar: Una Revisión de Alcance

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Abstract

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is one of the most influential international organizations in formulating school education policy. However, its history has been marked by significant bureaucratic dysfunctions that cyclically call into question its global leadership. In this scoping literature review, we map 36 studies published in the last decade in WoS and Scopus databases to understand the distinctive and contradictory nature of UNESCO's global governance in the school education sector. We classified the studies according to their objectives and identified recurrent themes. The article reveals an interest in understanding UNESCO's governance at various institutional dimensions and topological scales. However, few studies focus on its influence in countries of the Global South, a space that also challenges the organization's global scripts. Likewise, the studies analyzed draw attention to the expressive weakening of UNESCO's humanistic orientation in favor of neoliberal visions. The article concludes with a preliminary assessment of UNESCO's governance, suggesting the need to investigate the role of its regional enclaves and the normative influence that the organization exerts at the level of school educational experience

Keywords: UNESCO; Global Governance; Global Studies; School.

Resumen

La Organización de las Naciones Unidas para la Educación, la Ciencia y la Cultura (UNESCO) es una de las organizaciones internacionales más influyentes en la formulación de políticas para la educación escolar. Sin embargo, la historia de la organización ha estado marcada por importantes disfunciones burocráticas que cuestionan cíclicamente su liderazgo mundial. En esta revisión bibliográfica de alcance, mapeamos 36 estudios publicados en la última década en las bases de datos WoS y Scopus para comprender la naturaleza distintiva y contradictoria de la gobernanza global de la UNESCO en el sector de la educación escolar. Clasificamos los estudios en función de sus objetivos e identificamos temas recurrentes. El artículo revela un interés por comprender la gobernanza de la UNESCO en varias dimensiones institucionales y escalas topológicas. Sin embargo, pocos estudios se centran en su influencia en los países del Sur Global, un espacio que también desafía los guiones globales de la organización. Asimismo, algunos estudios llaman la atención sobre el debilitamiento expresivo de la orientación humanista de la UNESCO en favor de una convergencia hacia el neoliberalismo, mientras que otros son enfáticos en hacer discernibles sus diferencias ontológicas entre los actores emblemáticos del campo de políticas globales. El artículo concluye con una evaluación preliminar de la gobernanza de la UNESCO, sugiriendo la necesidad de investigar el papel de sus enclaves regionales y la influencia normativa que la organización ejerce a nivel de la experiencia educativa escolar.

Palabras clave: UNESCO; Gobernanza Global; Estudios Globales; Escuela.

1.   Introduction

For decades, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has been considered one of the most influential international organizations (IOs) in the school education sector (Elfert & Ydesen, 2023; Jones & Coleman, 2005). Early campaigns for the provision of primary education in countries on the global periphery, such as Haiti (Verna, 2016), China (Chen, 2022) and African colonies (Matasci, 2021), positioned UNESCO as a "moral bastion" in the countries of the Global South (Jones, 1988; Kulnazarova & Ydesen, 2018) and as one of the foundational drivers of modern international development (Mundy, 1999). Similarly, the work in establishing humanistic and inclusive educational agendas, such as its initiatives for the universalization of human rights in the post-war period (Meyer *et al.*, 2010) and the promotion of female education as a basis for equality (Peppin Vaughan, 2010), have positioned the organization as a "master of standards" (Finnemore, 1993) for a large number of educational issues that today enjoy a featured cultural position in the educational systems of the Global North and South.

The normative influences of IOs such as UNESCO in education have been conceptualized in recent decades under the notion of global governance, a term that describes the capacity of some actors to give content to educational policy at the international level (Jessop, 2015). As "spheres of authority" (Elfert & Ydesen, 2023, p. 5), flagship IOs have proven to possess the capacity to structure policy formulation at the national and local levels through formalized pathways and less perceptible methods that include "idea generation, knowledge mobilization or the reinforcement of policy paradigms" (Verger & Fontdevila, forthcoming). Some flagship IOs, such as the World Bank, have exerted their power through pathways that condition policy-making processes (Edwards *et al.*, 2023), while others, such as the OECD, have exerted their influence through the power of numbers and seductive images of economic development (Mundy *et al.*, 2016). In this field, UNESCO has historically been linked to forms of governance supported by soft power, manifested through its ability to manage educational data (Matasci, 2017), bring together diverse actors (Omolewa, 2007), and develop moralizing mental engineering disseminated through educational materials and research (Duedahl, 2016; Zapp, 2018).

In this sense, for some researchers, UNESCO's governance has exhibited ontologically positive properties in the global field throughout its history (Menashy & Manion, 2016). These properties have been expressed in democratic relations with nation-states, ideals of structural transformation, and appeals to the establishment of human rights as a framework for the social quality of school institutions (Suarez *et al.*, 2009), characteristics that would have led the agency to its international differentiation (Elfert & Ydensen 2023), as well as early organizational conflicts with the World Bank and OECD (Dorn & Ghodsee, 2012; Elfert, 2021; Ydesen & Grek, 2020). These qualities have led prominent representatives of international development to consider UNESCO as "the most universal and formally democratic of the organizations involved in educational multilateralism," which also "has persistently attempted to subjugate functional and economistic approaches to learning to a more humanistic vision" (Mundy, 1999, p. 47).

However, although UNESCO has enjoyed considerable recognition and ideational power in the education sector, the organization has also exhibited significant bureaucratic dysfunctions that have cyclically called into question its global leadership in education. Bureaucratic dysfunctions can be considered inefficient or deviant behaviors

originating from internal bureaucratic culture changes or the pressures of materially influential political environments (Barnett & Finnemore, 1999). On the one hand, some studies have reported critical organizational deficits related to the centralist scheme of its bureaucracy, the weakness of its statistical systems (Cussó, 2006), and external economic dependence (Heyneman, 2011). For example, for some former staff, UNESCO's bureaucratic deficits have been explained by as derived from the "closed door syndrome," a term used to describe an organizational culture that is resistant to change and lacks transparency, maintaining a "low and muted capacity for organizational learning from past mistakes and successes" (Benavot, 2011, p. 560; see also Burnett, 2019).

On the other hand, the competitive environments of the deeply market-oriented global policy field seem to corner UNESCO and make it play strategically with the private sector, including the philanthropic sector (Tikly, 2017). In studying the links between UNESCO and the private sector, Ridge & Kippels (2019) have hypothesized that engagements with the private sector derive both from strategies to address chronic defunding, including the destructive blow of the loss of U.S. financial contributions, and the urgencies of maintaining its international relevance in the Sustainable Development Goals 4 (SDG4) scenario. However, due to these seemingly strategic partnerships, these authors have warned that "private sector partnerships could reshape UNESCO and render it an extension of corporate agendas, rather than the other way around" (Ridge & Kippels, p. 105). Although this scenario has been raised as a possibility for the future, the truth is that, for some, the pressures of global political architecture have significantly influenced UNESCO to the point of "has displaced it from the position of a distinct IO in the global education policy governance" to "perform the relatively marginal role of a collaborator with strong Global south networks" (Sayed *et al.*, 2023, p. 553).

In recent years, some synthesis studies have tried to unravel the role that IOs and their policy instruments exert on the fate of education, recognizing the ideational and material specificities they deploy in exercising their power. Thus, some reviews have documented the effects of PISA on policy formulation (Hopfenbeck *et al.*, 2018) and the role of non-state actors in developing inclusion policies at the national level (Schuster and Kolleck, 2021). Recently, Edwards *et al.* (2023) have specified the distinctive roles of the World Bank in influencing national education policymaking. However, we do not have studies to visualize trends in UNESCO governance in the school education sector. The distinctive and contradictory characteristics of its governance in recent decades are of sociological and axiological interest, given that they may contribute to the generation of significant educational and democratic deficits in those spaces where this organization influences, such as in the Global South.

Considering UNESCO's distinctive and contradictory position and existing synthesis gaps, this study aims to present a scoping literature review of academic studies produced in the last decade focusing on UNESCO's governance of the school education sector in the 21st century. We provide a preliminary classification of the research and the educational areas that UNESCO seeks to influence. In addition, we identify thematic patterns in the studies concerning analytical convergences and divergences to recognize existing sensitivities in understanding UNESCO governance. In doing so, we hope to identify consolidated and emerging research areas and gaps that will motivate future researchers to generate deeper systematic reviews and new lines of inquiry.

2. Methodology

We analyze scholarly articles published in the last decade that study UNESCO's activities and governance at the school level, an educational segment historically central to the organization. The scoping review allows us to descriptively map available evidence in a particular field and formulate questions for future systematic reviews that address substantive aspects of the field (Munn *et al.*, 2018). The search process adhered to PRISMA guidelines (Page *et al.*, 2021). The WoS Core Collection and Scopus databases were consulted because of their large number of journals and because the studies are subject to peer review. The search combined the following words: UNESCO, international organization, governance, global governance, activities, global policy, policy transfer, policy translation, borrowing, lending, education, school, primary school, secondary school, and high school. Filters were applied to limit the results to articles, and a time frame of 2012-2023 was set. 2012 was chosen as a milestone for article selection, as it marked the start of Sustainable Development Goals 4 (SDG4) as the new UN global agenda. This milestone might have motivated researchers to ask further questions about UNESCO's role in global governance. As we are interested in the specific functioning of UNESCO and its activities in the field of education, we established four exclusion criteria (see Figure 1): (1) articles that do not study UNESCO's school and governance-related activities; (2) articles related to higher education; (3) studies using educational data or conceptual frameworks developed by UNESCO; (4) historiographical articles describing activities before 2000. Nevertheless, we have drawn on this crucial bibliography to frame and guide our reflections, ensuring the relevance and timeliness of our research.
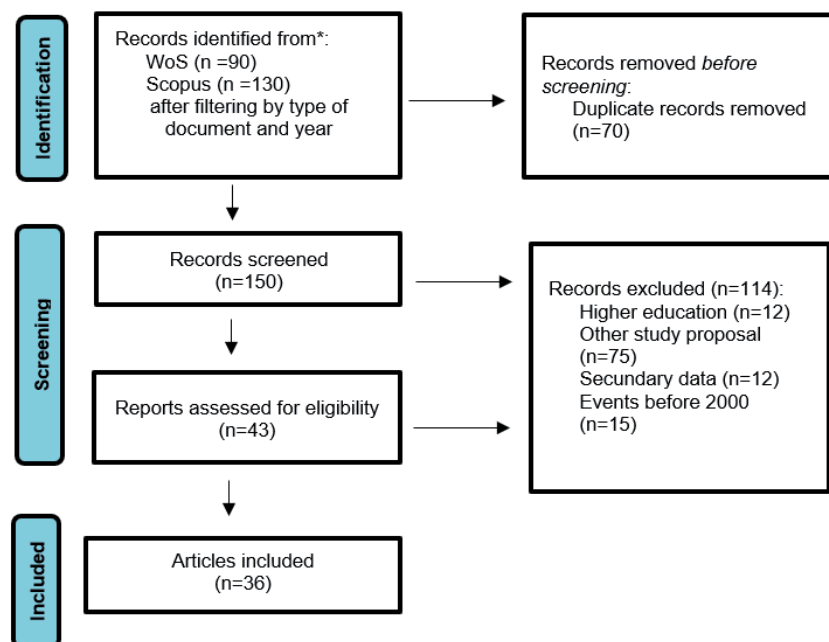

Figure 1. PRISMA diagram

The articles were extracted between November 2022 and December 2023. The final selection included 36 studies. First, we analyzed the studies to generate a characterization of the field in terms of theoretical and methodological approaches and the geopolitics

of publication. Subsequently, the analysis focused on the broad themes that cut across the research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After several iteration attempts, we identified three broad categories of studies in this second phase. Finally, we identified patterns of common themes within the categories, which we grouped into subcategories.

Table 1.

Summary of categories, subcategories, and authors

Categories	Subcategories	Authors
Intrabureaucracy: Studies interested in the internal production of norms and organizational change.	Educational metrics	Addey, 2021; Fontdevila, 2023; Grek, 2020; Zapp, 2021.
	Organizational change	Elfert, 2013; Vickers, 2022.
Policy networks: Policy networks: Studies interested in the relationship between UNESCO and diverse stakeholders in the educational field	Global collaboration	Addey, 2021; Auld *et al.*, 2019; Fontdevila, 2023; Forsberg, 2019; Saura, 2020; Uhlenbrock & Meier, 2021.
	National relations	Auld *et al.*, 2019; Forsberg, 2019; Uhlenbrock & Meier, 2023.
	Local influences	Al-Nakib, 2012; Kasa *et al.*, 2022; Shultz & Guimaraes-Iosif, 2012; Vigo-Arrazola *et al.*, 2022.
Dissemination of norms: Studies interested in UNESCO as a disseminator of educational ideas.	Continuity and change	Biesta, 2022; Bryan, 2022; Elfert, 2015, 2019, 2023; Kiuppis, 2014; Lerch & Buckner, 2018; Locatelli, 2022; Mochizuki *et al.*, 2022; Sobe, 2022.
	Teaching and learning	Cerqua *et al.*, 2014; Donaire Gallardo *et al.*, 2022; Espejo *et al.*, 2023; Shultz & Viczko, 2021; VanderDussen Toukan, 2018; Vanderhoven, 2023.
	Convergence and response	Akkari & Lauwerier, 2015; Borjian, 2014; Donaire Gallardo *et al.*, 2022; Elfert, 2023; Forsberg, 2019; Robertson, 2022; Vanderhoven, 2023.

3. Characterization of the studies

3.1 Geographies of UNESCO

Geographically, the contexts of UNESCO's educational and governance activities studied are not diverse and analytically express a clear topological trend. Most studies, 28 (78%), analyze UNESCO's educational and governance activities considering a global topological dimension. Only eight studies (4%) analyze UNESCO's activities in a national or local context, five of which analyze activities and governance in countries of the Global South (Cambodia, India, Kuwait, Brazil, and South Africa). The predominance of a global perspective in the study of UNESCO may be linked to general theoretical intentions to overcome methodological nationalism. However, the lack of studies on UNESCO's influence in the Global South contradicts the frequent preoccupation of researchers with the crucial power of IOs in this space (Silova *et al.*, 2020).

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The studies on UNESCO also show distinctive characteristics concerning the diversification of the geopolitics of academic production. In all the studies in the sample, the first author belongs to an institution in a high-income country. Spain 7 (19%) and the United Kingdom 7 (19%) lead the ranking in terms of the origin of the studies, followed by United States, 4 (11%) and Canada, 4 (11%). The remaining countries are Germany, 2 (6%); France, 2 (6%), Switzerland, 2 (6%), Scotland, 1 (3%), Finland, 1 (3%), Hong Kong, 1 (3%), Ireland, 1 (3%), Norway 1 (3%), Italy 1 (3%), Luxembourg, 1 (3%) and Japan, 1 (3%). Since our search focused on WoS and Scopus journals, English was positioned as the predominant language in the sample, 32 (89%), followed by Spanish, 4 (11%).

3.2 Theories and Methodologies

It is worth noting that 27 (75%) of the studies in the sample explicitly state one or more conceptual frameworks to address UNESCO's activities and governance in education. In comparison, 9 (25%) do not do so. The study's characteristic feature that states conceptual frameworks is that only a few address UNESCO under the perspectives or concepts of the so-called global studies in education policy, with explicit references to neo-institutional theory, world societies, policy transfer, and policy harmonization. The vast majority of the studies that stated some framework resorted to concepts and authors in an eclectic manner, without clear trend patterns, such as neo-liberal theories, philanthrocapitalism, social mapping, and citizenship theories, which shows that multiple analytical angles traverse the study of UNESCO's activities and governance.

A different situation is observed about the methods used, which show clear patterns of approaches. About the overall designs, 34 (94%) studies can be defined as qualitative, 1 (3%) quantitative, and 1 (3%) mixed. Authors made their methods explicit in 27 (%) of the studies in the sample, including data production and analysis techniques. Whether explicitly or implicitly, documentary analysis of policy texts produced by the organization constitutes the recurrent and preferred access route to UNESCO's realities, 35 (97%). Autonomously or in addition to documentary analysis, 14 studies used interviews with key actors, including UNESCO staff, beneficiaries of UNESCO policies such as students, teachers, principals, and local political actors linked to the organization. Only 1 (3%) of the study used surveys as a data production method.

3.3 Policy and thematic areas

It should be noted that most of the studies in the sample, 20 (56%), have an analysis of other actors and phenomena among their objectives. Although UNESCO is a key actor in these studies, they also delve into the actions of other significant organizations such as the OECD, the World Bank, the European Union, Microsoft, and Google. In addition, some examine local processes or actors related to UNESCO's activities and governance, such as ministries of education, advisors, students, teachers, and school principals.

The studies in the sample refer to many educational policies and issues for the school sector developed by or involving UNESCO. The Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) is the institutional policy framework mentioned most frequently in the studies, 9 (25%), followed by the Education for All project, 7 (19%). UNESCO's flagship reports, such as the Faure Report, Delors, and Reimagining Our Futures Together Report, were the predominant policy framework in 6 studies (17%). Other predominant policy frameworks were the Associated Schools Network (AspNET), 3 (8%), UNESCO's Quality Physical Education, 2 (6%), UNESCO's Global Education Coalition, 2 (%), MEGIEP, 2

(6%), Global Monitoring Reports (GMR), 1 (3%), Global Education Monitoring Report (GEMR), 1 (3%), UNESCO Framework for Action, 1 (3%), UNESCO Policy Guidelines for Mobile Learning, 1 (3%), UNEVOC, 1 (3%), Salamanca Process, 2 (6%), Futures Literacy, 1 (3%), Long Life Learning, 3 (8%), and Education for Peace, 1 (3%).

4. Thematic Analysis

This section presents the results of the thematic analysis of the sample. As mentioned, we identified three key categories of studies that express the major thematic orientations research has developed in the last decade. Each of these categories also accounts for particular sub-thematic crossings. We mention some studies to exemplify the thematic crossings and tensions visualized in the studies.

4.1. Intrabureaucracy

The dynamics of UNESCO's internal functioning have become a topic of interest in recent years. The articles on this subject respond to the so-called "practical turn." We have grouped these studies under this concept, as they provide information on the current context of UNESCO, the perspectives of its representatives, the material conditions of its internal functioning, and institutional changes.

4.1.1. Educational metrics

One of the critical educational areas developed by UNESCO in the last two decades is related to the construction of metrics. Although this work is part of the organization's history, developing a global evaluative culture and increased cooperation through global agendas have brought the organization new challenges and intra-bureaucratic tensions in creating and monitoring educational indicators. The intra-organizational difficulties and tensions in constructing reliable metrics and reporting for education can be exemplified in the self-organizing policies of the GRM[1], an autonomous office housed at UNESCO that coordinated actions to fulfill the Education for All (EFA) agenda in the early 2000s. These strategies included hiring high-level ad hoc staff, seeking new donor portfolios, and constructing a narrative focused on the value of data rather than educational philosophy. Although the GMR's organizational strategies have "provided a partial boost for UNESCO's reputation" (Edwards *et al.*, 2018, p. 47), views on the effectiveness of the GRM are not entirely cross-cutting within the organization. Recently, GRM officials expressed concern in describing the organization as underfunded. This limitation has had "consequences range from limited access to journals and digital libraries (e.g., jstor) to the lack of employed researchers with particular expertise (and the increasing out-contracting of research tasks) and, most importantly, the lack of funds to gather primary data through novel surveys and studies" (Zapp, 2021, p. 1031). Officials associated with the GEMR have stated that, despite its desire to produce cutting-edge knowledge, lack of funding may mean a loss of voice and influence in the international community.

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1 The Education for All Global Monitoring Report was created in 2000 to assess the achievements of the EFA goals agreed upon in Dakar. The report described progress, effective reforms, and best practices in the areas linked to the Education for All program. It also drew attention to emerging challenges. The establishment of SDG 4 in Incheon in 2015 and institutional restructuring processes led to renaming the Global Monitoring Report (GRM) to the Global Education Monitoring Report (GEMR).

The specific realities of the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (IUS) have exhibited similar organizational trends in global data production for SDG monitoring4. Although it has been said that IUS "has made an effort to posit itself as an honest broker driven by a public-service ethos" (Fontdevila, 2023, p. 8), at the international level, its position remains fragile due to technical expertise limitations, lack of funding, bureaucratic rigidity and frictions with UNESCO central management. These internal shortcomings would explain the "heavy reliance on organizations such as Brookings or ACER in the early days of the SDG4 indicator debate" and the fact that IUS reports are "prepared in conjunction with consultancy firms, research organizations and assessment consortia (e.g., IEA, ACER) and independent researchers" (Fontdevila, 2023, p. 9).

4.1.2. Organizational change

Political and identity tensions within UNESCO's high-level institutes have been an essential focus for understanding the organization's activities and governance. UNESCO is a complex organization affected by micropolitical pressures within broader organizational change processes. A clear example of these pressures is found in the creation and development of the Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development (MGIEP) in India, an institute whose leadership, paradoxically, would have been characterized in its early days by resistance to Gandhi's humanistic vision, particularly from the political party of MGIEP's director. Likewise, the early leadership of the institute would have led to a significant loss of the ideals of social transformation advocated by UNESCO, now characterized "towards neuro-enthusiasm, techno- solutionism and depoliticisation" (Vickers, 2022, p. 4). At the same time, political and identity conflicts within the organization have historically affected the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL), an institution focused on developing lifelong learning. The transposition of educational functions between the central UNESCO institutes in Germany and Paris has led to a change in UIL's thematic profiles. These changes have been especially evident since the early 2000s, a period characterized by its financial crisis and a restructuring "much closer alignment of UIL with the administrative rules and regulations of UNESCO headquarters and a tighter integration of its work into UNESCO's programme" (Elfert, 2013, p. 240).

4.2. Policy networks

One of UNESCO's objectives is to support the development of educational policies through strategic alliances with global, national, and local actors. The studies in this sample document the organic partnership between UNESCO and the various actors involved in designing and implementing education policies. The topics of these studies cover partnerships at global, national, and local levels and analyze the opportunities and tensions arising from this collaborative process.

4.2.1 Global collaboration

Although UNESCO has autonomously developed essential work in educational production, establishing collaborative networks between UNESCO and other transnational actors remains a distinctive feature of its global governance. UNESCO emerges in international public policy through intricate networks of interdependence in the areas of metrics construction (Fontdevila, 2023; Addey, 2021; Grek, 2020), standard-setting work through educational guidelines (Uhlenbrock and Meier, 2021), and the coordination of global educational projects (Saura, 2020).

The growth of collaboration has implied UNESCO's mutability of its classic role as a global forum in education, which has shifted in recent decades between the simultaneous roles of coordinator, promoter, and partner. These changes are associated with meeting the objectives of increasingly complex and monetarily costly agendas. For example, UNESCO's association as a peer partner with private companies such as NIKE for the transnational development of the Quality Physical Education Guidelines (Uhlenbrock & Meier, 2021) or the coordination of philanthropic actors such as Microsoft within the Coalition for Education during the covid-19 pandemic (Saura, 2020), were justified, among other reasons, under the need to ensure the survival of financially demanding projects for the organization. Although global collaboration has brought reputational and social responsibility benefits for both sides, collaboration with business has also meant that private actors "pursue their agendas" (Uhlenbrock & Meier, 2021, p. 537) and advocate new "forms of production and accumulation of capital" (Saura, 2020, p. 166).

Likewise, the coordination of collaboration networks is associated with the dynamics of contemporary global governance in which the results of the agendas are only possible in the interdependence of the international space. However, agendas coordinated by UNESCO, such as the SDGs4, are characterized by contestations of power and control of inter-organizational expertise. For example, the collaboration between UNESCO and the OECD to produce metrics has involved revitalizing old paradigmatic disputes characterized by the organization's critical positions with the OECD's pragmatic approaches to learning and SDG4 monitoring (Addey, 2021). The SDG4 coordination tasks have also entailed the work of "taming" parties, especially the evaluation industry, to ensure the viability of the agenda (Fontdevila, 2023, p. 10). Notwithstanding these tensions, UNESCO seems to democratically lead the coordination and tracking of SDG4 among multiple transnational actors who share the metrics as the "new lingua franca of the transnational governance of education" (Greek, 2020, p. 143).

4.2.2. National relations

Studies investigating UNESCO's relations with national and state actors are exceptional in the sample, even though IOs state that national states are their "main employers and customers" (Forsberg, 2019, p. 34).

Even so, the studies produced in the last decade hint at a conflictive relationship between UNESCO and national political actors, characterized by programmatic disagreements between global and local levels, failed policy transfers, and the cultural clash between Global North and Global South paradigms. Mismatches of international and local expectations have been evident in attempts to implement the Quality Physical Education Guidelines in the South African educational context; a policy originated in the Global North aimed at reducing morbidity rates through promoting the sport in schools. While UNESCO appears to have promoted participatory strategies and rhetoric emphasizing the importance of the program for education for local political actors, UNESCO's arguments "hardly fit with actual living conditions in South Africa and the everyday experiences of educators" (Uhlenbrock & Meier, p. 147).

Experiences of misalignment have also been documented in countries such as Cambodia, where UNESCO contradictorily participated in implementing PISA-D, a project promoted by the OECD and the World Bank. Although UNESCO initially opposed the implementation of the test, arguing the country's autonomy to define its monitoring methods, the political dominance positions of the OECD and the World Bank would have

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led the organization to an unexpected turn in its policy by bypassing the decisions of the national education ministry (Auld *et al.*, 2019).

4.2.3 Local influences

Some studies describe the reception of local ideas that arise in the context of programs or policies promoted by UNESCO. Although these studies do not document the direct intervention of the organization in local spaces, they point to the subjective translations that policy beneficiaries construct about the organization and its agenda, policies that, although recognizable for their democratic content, are also subject in some cases to "misunderstanding and misapplication" in the traducing process (Vigo-Arrazola *et al.*, 2022, p. 302).

Such is the case of responses from members of UNESCO Associated Schools in Canada-Brazil (Shultz & Guimaraes-Iosif, 2012), Kuwait (Al-Nakib, 2012), and Finland (Kasa *et al.*, 2022). Promoting peace and citizenship emerges as one of the most essential humanistic values promoted by UNESCO in all AspNET contexts studied in the last decade. However, the global citizenship themes promoted by UNESCO have different translations depending on the context. For example, Finnish AspNET school teachers reported recurrently working on ecological issues and sustainable development, while in Brazil, global citizenship "is still very incipient and needs to be better addressed and understood by school's leaders and teachers" (Shultz & Guimaraes-Iosif, 2012, p. 250). Similarly, global citizenship agendas were perceived in Canada as a way to prepare students for international markets, while in Brazil, some felt they should be aimed at politicization and reinforcement of community and publicness. In contrast, the global citizenship activities promoted by ASPnet in Kuwait have permeated the curriculum with difficulty, and although they generated feelings of belonging to a global community, they also generated conflicting feelings among students and especially among parents educated in a highly conservative context (Al-Nakib, 2012).

4.3. Dissemination of norms

This group includes a set of studies discussing UNESCO's role as a disseminator of educational discourses. It is the most extensive set of studies produced in the last decade. In general, they examine the ideas and styles of thought that the organization disseminates to shape the content of education. The studies seek to reveal the unique characteristics of its educational identity and the internal contradictions and philosophical disagreements between UNESCO and the actors that coexist in the global arena. We group these studies under the concept of norm diffusion because they express styles of global governance centered on classical mechanisms of ideals diffusion.

4.3.1. Continuity and change

Perspective and prospective studies point out that UNESCO's humanistic and idealistic thinking has undergone major transformations as the privatization of politics and neoliberal agendas advance as the epistemic framework of schooling. These studies combine historical reflection with sociological thinking on the current possibilities of humanism.

Opinions on the transformation of humanistic ideals are widespread in the literature, although there are substantial differences in the generative factors. What is certain is that the literature agrees on an expressive weakening of the humanistic matrix, which is perceptible when considering key policies such as adult education (Elfert,

2019), inclusion policies (Kiuppis, 2014) or when contrasting the humanistic idealism of UNESCO's historical reports. For example, for some, the Fauré and Delors Reports maintain continuities in the humanist matrix in that "Both reports draw on ideas such as the equality of human beings as global citizens […] and the ability of human beings to change their world" (Elfert, 2015, p. 91). However, the possibilities for realizing this agenda, or distinctive programs such as Lifelong Learning, are externally constrained by the normative force of the economic agenda of the OECD and the World Bank (Biesta, 2022; Elfert, 2019; Sobe, 2022).

Some studies have even suggested that current policy environments oriented towards greater private sector involvement not only challenge the humanist legacy but have succeeded in transforming the UNESCO agenda along critical dimensions (Locatelli, 2022). For example, the ecosystem of neoliberal discourses in which UNESCO is embedded would have implied a normative reorganization of longstanding notions of the importance of the global community toward values that privilege personal empowerment and individual rights (Lerch & Buckner, 2018). This environment, moreover, would have had an apparent effect on the orientation of the Sahle-Work Report, which, while retaining humanist legacies, "the report avoids any analysis of power, in terms of who shapes educational discourses and technologies, who benefits and who profits from them" (Elfert, 2023, p. 408). The explanations for the weakening of the humanist discourse also seem to come from within, especially from the *neuroliberal* (Mochizuki *et al.*, 2022) or *neurocentric* (Bryan, 2022) turn. The creation of MGIEP in India has discursively assumed the centrality of the brain and individual minds as factors of educational change, with "almost total exclusion of politics and ethics" as the foundation of social change (Mochizuki *et al.*, 2022, p. 709).

4.3.2. Teaching and Learning

An interesting feature of UNESCO's normative production has been its position on the foundations and methods that should guide teaching-learning processes within the classroom, a position that in the literature is debated between confusion, coherence, and subordination to the requirements of the neoliberal economy.

The EFA reports throughout the 1990s and 2000s, as well as the recent guidelines for learning in the context of SDG4, show contradictory views on the pedagogical foundations that should guide teachers' actions in schools. While UNESCO seems to promote student-centered teaching approaches and the development of collective civic and well-being capacities (VanderDussen Toukan, 2018; Vanderhoven, 2023), it is also true that it has promoted pedagogies oriented to economic growth (Vanderhoven, 2023) and mainly, behaviorist pedagogies oriented to individual performance, under the premise that structured teaching "can improve students' results" (Cerqua *et al.*, 2014, p. 253). UNESCO's recent pedagogical responses to the COVID-19 pandemic also show its contradictory relationship. The UNESCO Global Coalition for Education, an initiative that positioned private companies to create and offer free educational content, discursively excluded teachers, students, and administrators from the creation of pedagogical knowledge, a fact that directly contradicted the promotion of collaborative skills and pedagogical solidarity supported by the organization. This "creative contortionism" seems to derive from its divided position on the global stage, in which it must respond to the needs of "local knowledge and actors" while giving "welcoming private-sector actors who would benefit greatly from marketising schooling" (Shultz & Viczko, 2021, p. 233).

4.3.3. Convergence and response

Studies of the last decade also contrast UNESCO's contradictory identities with those of other emblematic actors in the global policy field. UNESCO seems to be torn between contestation and convergence in various educational domains. On the one hand, UNESCO seems to preserve and make discernible its humanist epistemic identity vis-à-vis organizations such as the OECD and the World Bank (Borjian, 2014). For others, however, the distinctions would be blurred and associated with losing the organization's techno-political capacity to act globally (Akkari & Lauwerier, 2015).

First, in a broad set of policies promoted by UNESCO in the last decade, humanism and democracy would operate as the fundamental paradigmatic basis of global governance in education. This characteristic would distance it from its main competitor on the world stage, the OECD. Both UNESCO and OECD maintain policies for similar educational domains but with clear philosophical distinctions. For example, the policies for educational inclusion promoted by the OECD would reflect a multifactorial vision of the causes and solutions to school discrimination. However, this vision would still be dominated by individualistic instrumentalism, in which educational inclusion refers to the individual enjoyment of equal opportunities and educational quality. In contrast, UNESCO would have developed and expanded its idea of inclusion from a narrow conception of disability to one informed by an ideal of "transformation" of the educational structures that generate exclusion (Martínez-Usarralde, 2020, p. 107). The distinctions between organizations would also be reflected in how educational futures are governed. This policy has gained prominence in the last decade due to criticisms of unfulfilled welfare promises of past agendas such as EFA. However, while the OECD's philosophy of governing the future is characterized by faith in metrics and individual responsibility, UNESCO "continues to use humanism as a contrast to what it sees as the OECD's biased economism" (Robertson, 2022, p. 202).

Second, paradigmatic distinctions between organizations are theoretically controversial in some policy domains. UNESCO's major discursive structures would maintain significant philosophical parallels with the visions of major organizations in critical areas such as teacher training and technical and vocational education. For example, regarding teacher training policies developed in the last two decades, UNESCO would have created a holistic approach whose political core would not differ structurally from other IOs such as the OECD and the European Union. In other words, they would converge towards a shared idea of the depoliticization of the profession, in which "teachers are not recognized as having the professional authority to participate in educational policies" (Donaire Gallardo *et al.*, 2022, p. 34). From another point of view, although there are essential traces of UNESCO's humanistic identity in technical and vocational education, this agenda would maintain problems with its general philosophy. They would resort, instead, "on many of the same economic arguments used by other IOs" (Vanderhoven, 2023, p. 12).

5. Discussion

The relevance attributed to UNESCO as a moderator of the trajectories of education systems and the contradictory nature of its governance have led us to propose a descriptive map of research approaches and to deepen our understanding of the political realities of the organization.

The results of our review show that research on UNESCO published in WoS and Scopus journals follows a clear geopolitical trend, both in the origin of the research and the topics studied. Studies on UNESCO come mainly from institutions in the Global North and favor a de-territorialized approach in analyzing the organization's activities and governance. Along these lines, studies on the Global South constitute a minority, a worrying and contradictory trend, considering that UNESCO's activities and governance have historically been located in low-income countries (Mundy *et al.* 2016). As such, there is ample research scope for understanding UNESCO's active work in global south countries and local school contexts, such as AspNET, especially in the context of the SDGs4.

Like the conclusions of a recent review on the World Bank (Edwards *et al.* 2023), the studies produced in the last decade on UNESCO are unclear regarding making their theoretical approaches explicit, making it challenging to observe trends in how authors frame their study of UNESCO in the school sector. Instead, the methodological tendencies toward documentary analysis are clear. This could explain why most of the studies in this selection approach UNESCO from its discursive production of norms. As a relevant finding, institutional ethnographies and social network analysis, two methodologies in vogue in studies on international actors and policies, have been neglected in recent research on UNESCO. However, key actors' interviews as a methodology continue to provide an insider's view of the organization's functioning. These findings invite researchers in the future to mobilize methodological strategies that allow for a productive crossover between documentary analysis, interviews, and social network analysis (NSA) as a strategy for monitoring and describing a governance that involves both other international organizations (Dorn & Ghodsee 2012; Elfert, 2021; Ydesen & Grek, 2020), as well as actors coming from the private sector (Ridge & Kippels, 2019; Tikly 2017).

On the other hand, our qualitative analysis shows important thematic crossovers between the studies, reflecting a cross-fertilization of researchers' interests and the realities affecting UNESCO as a global organization. First, the intrabureaucracy category reflects the "internal turn" in the study of UNESCO. In our review, this attention highlighted the complexity and internal bureaucratic tensions affecting the organization, which can also be placed in a historical perspective. The changes initiated by UNESCO since 2000 indicate intentions focused on internal strengthening but also revealed organizational dysfunctions (Barnett & Finnemore 1999). Although studies show that UNESCO builds commitments to improve its credibility and legitimacy through the reorganization of its statistical services and the recalibration of its institutes, the information provided by the studies does not allow us to conclude that UNESCO has overcome its financial and technical deficits that affected its legitimacy in the past (Jones & Coleman, 2005; Heyneman, 1999; Mundy, 1999). Moreover, for some authors, creating the MGIEP institute as an experiment in innovation and adaptation to advances in neuroscience introduces neoliberal anomalies into the history of the organization's humanistic thinking. Future studies should assess whether these anomalies constitute dysfunctional behaviors that undermine UNESCO's organizational ontology and generate resistance in local environments committed to alternative ideological transformations.

Special mention deserves the attention that researchers have devoted examining how UNESCO constructs educational metrics, a line of inquiry that complements the organization's history of metrics production (Heyneman, 1999; Cussó, 2006; Matasci, 2017). Studies suggest that UNESCO is moving between its classical governance function through idealistic norms and a new and growing governance through numerical

data (Zapp, 2018). Studies highlight the political nature of leading the production of metrics for the SDGs4, mainly when they are subject to financial pressures and methodological disagreements among stakeholders. However, one aspect we would like to point out concerns UNESCO's role in measuring metrics in regional contexts. This aspect is barely perceptible in the studies included in this review. Future studies on the role of the Latin-American Laboratory for Assessment of the Quality of Education (LLECE) or the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) in the construction of regional metrics and their use in national policies could complement the constructivist research agenda on the production of standards and provide greater certainty on UNESCO's orientation toward governance through numerical data. This call certainly implies understanding the educational role of UNESCO's regional offices, which, unlike the high-level research institutes, occupy a non-specific place in the studies included in this review.

Second, the category of policy networks shows the researchers' interest in reconstructing UNESCO's governance from a relational and associative point of view. The themes identified here broadly suggest that UNESCO maintains its historical relationship of tensions with the OECD and, to a lesser extent, with the World Bank, a relationship characterized by genuine collaboration, strategic opposition, and financial submission. Furthermore, the issues identified about the relationship with national spaces suggest that UNESCO has had significant difficulties transferring policies, even to countries in the Global South. While the organization's strategies may exhibit aspects of positive governance (Mundy, 1999), they can fail when the content of its initiatives diverges from local expectations and experiences. Despite this, we emphasize that few studies focus on countries in the Global South. This finding should draw the attention of researchers, given the political and cultural implications of the clash of educational agendas explored in this review. These mismatches align with an extensive literature that has shown that, in the detail of the case studies, changing motivations and outcomes emerge when adopting educational frameworks from the Global North (Silova *et al.*, 2020).

An important finding pertains to the research efforts for reconstructing the reception of UNESCO's ideas among local educational actors. The perceptions of these subjects about UNESCO and its ideals question the belief that governance is embodied in high-level politics. Our findings show the existence of micropolitics in which UNESCO's ideals continually oscillate and are reshaped by the actors' lived experiences. Future studies can delve deeper into mental engineering efforts carried out by UNESCO (Duedahl, 2016) aimed to change the day-to-day life of schools.

Third, the category diffusion of norms evidences the orientation, in most of the studies selected in this review, towards the analysis of the philosophical principles and educational policies promoted by the organization, a finding in line with the historical role attributed to UNESCO as a builder of norms (Finnemore, 1993; Elfert & Ydesen, 2023). The issues identified reveal an institutionalized contradiction of the philosophical coherence of the organization, which is torn between its historical humanism and neoliberal arguments. Beyond the fact that these contradictions seem cyclical and conjunctural, the studies agree that the latest philosophical orientations of the Sahle-Work Report express the loss of political critique and moral awareness as a driver of educational change. The studies also reveal the persistence of a fundamental historical distinction between the identity of UNESCO and other IOs, such as the OECD, characterized by a conception of education as a universal and rights-oriented common good.

6. Conclusion

The studies analyzed in this review provide a preliminary mapping of the research produced in the last decade on UNESCO's governance and educational activities in the 21st century. Although this review has followed a scoping approach, it is clear that UNESCO has emerged in the last decade as an object of study in its own right, characterized by a pluralistic research environment, albeit with critical thematic convergences. Future reviews could broaden the temporal scope of the studies and focus on specific topics in depth. Following the work of Edwards *et al.* (2023), a future approach could be to recognize the particular policy instruments that UNESCO deploys to influence national/local policies. This perspective could broaden the classical attribution of UNESCO as a disseminating agency. We also consider it crucial to systematically reconstruct UNESCO's work in the countries of the Global South, an area little explored in the studies included in this review. We suggest that researchers reconstruct the role of UNESCO's regional offices in Santiago de Chile, Dakar, Lebanon, and Bangkok, areas not explored in recent research. Similarly, we consider it crucial that the study of governance track the particles of UNESCO governance at the level of schools and school experience and not exclusively on the high ground of policy. This could improve our understanding of the cycle of UNESCO policies and allow researchers to assess better their impact on global disputes over the right to shape education policy.

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* References marked with an asterisk indicate studies included in the review.

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