CHAPTER 7

BEYOND LARGE-SCALE ACHIEVEMENT TESTING – THE ‘PSYCHOLOGICAL TURN’ IN INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS’ WORK ON EDUCATIONAL ASSESSMENT

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ABSTRACT

This article put forward two claims. First, it argues that, historically, the rationale for education has shifted from religious and national indoctrination to, in the more recent neoliberal period, human capital and the related notion of individual empowerment. Second, the article argues that the recent shift toward individual empowerment is reflected in international organizations’ (IOs) changing emphases in education. IOs’ educational agenda has undergone various changes since their early work in the 1960s: From the structural expansion of national education systems to the measurement of individual educational achievement through a focus on competencies and, most recently, individual psychosocial development.
Based on a content analysis of 60 documents from 38 IOs involved in international education networks between 1990 and 2015, this work identified an expanding field of IOs directing attention to the mental capabilities of a learner. The proliferated model of an individual actorhood reflected in these novel assessment designs will be presented and embedded in wider discussions about the cultural construction of the individual in contemporary world polity.

**Keywords:** International organizations; global education and lifelong learning; international achievement testing; competencies; individual psychosocial development; empowerment

## INTRODUCTION

The number of international organizations (IOs) involved in education has grown considerably reflecting the great importance ascribed to education since the 1950s until the present day, most clearly expressed in the education for all (EFA) initiative. Since the 1990s, EFA brings together a vast network of governmental, intergovernmental (IGOs), nongovernmental (INGOs), and for-profit organizations (BINGOs) (Chabbott, 2003; Zapp & Dahmen, 2017).

EFA goals, together with the millennium development goals, call for the expansion of educational and learning opportunities at all levels, particularly in pre-primary and primary education, but also for young adults. Importantly, the notion of “quality” is enshrined in the EFA catalog as its sixth goal. Concerned about the performance of their systems, nation-states around the world have, often led by IOs, introduced national educational reporting systems and, now routine and sometimes mandatory, large-scale assessments to measure competence-based educational output at virtually all levels (Heyneman & Lykins, 2008; Lerch, Meyer, & Ramirez, 2016; Francisco O. Ramirez, John W. Meyer & Julia Lerch). This shift from input governance and structural educational expansion to output assessment has been much discussed in the literature (Benavot & Meyer, 2013; Fenwick, Mangez, & Ozga, 2014; Gorur, 2014). The particular role IOs play in this “metrological mood” (Power, 2004, p. 766) in education has led to a change in scholarly thinking about IOs’ governance that includes not only regulative or coercive mechanisms but also “softer,” normative instruments (Baker & Wiseman, 2005; Ghali & Mundy, 2009; Wiseman & Stevens-Taylor, 2017).
While both rationales (expansion and assessment) continue to play an important role in IOs’ educational work, I hold that the search for the guarantors of quality, performance, and achievement, along with a strong reliance on competences, have led to a new phase in educational thinking at the IO level. This recent phase is marked by a strong focus on the qualities of the individual learner. A similar shift already has been noted in the context of lifelong learning (LLL), an educational reform concept, which experienced astonishing spread among nation-states and IOs until very recently (Jakobi, 2006; Zapp & Dahmen, 2017). Here, the egalitarian perspective of the educational system is said to be replaced by a (neoliberal) perspective of the learning individual and her responsibilities (Field, 2006).

This model of the autonomous individual learner continues to occupy a central role in IOs’ educational discourse. While acknowledging the neoliberal underpinning in this model, this work argues that the recent attention to the individual learner identified at the level of IOs reflects deeper cultural assumptions about a theorized modern actor: the learning individual and her psychosocial needs and capabilities. The powerful “cult of the individual” (Durkheim, 1893/1984) in contemporary world culture replaces older notions of religious, national, and even economic rationales for educational policy.

In Part I of the article, I briefly outline the origin, evolution, and causes of modern educational expansion drawing on findings from institutional research. While the construction of the individual has, with different motives and in different variants, always been at the heart of socialization efforts in times of first religious, then national, and, more lately, economic motives for expansion, the current focus on the empowerment of the individual through education indicates a novel understanding of education as serving individual development and actorhood per se and not in the name of exogenous rationales.

This coincides with, and partly explains, I argue, changes in educational thinking at the level of IOs. Part II discusses the different phases in IOs’ work in global education. The first phase is defined by a strong emphasis on structural educational expansion resonating with IOs’ calls for increased rates of access to and completion of educational trajectories. IOs’ second phase started in the 1990s with a heightened interest in measuring educational achievements facilitated by advancements in psychology and education sciences. While this phase has recently peaked with the inclusion of all educational levels and the participation of most countries worldwide in large-scale assessments, a novel focus has appeared on IOs’ educational agenda, which has received only little attention. This novel focus is on the psychosocial qualities of the individual learner.
Based on a content analysis of 60 documents from 38 IOs involved in international education networks between 1990 and 2015, this work identifies the beginning of such a new phase in IOs’ thinking about education. A large number of IOs has begun to shift attention to the psychosocial needs, qualities, and capabilities of the learning individual, proposing a highly theorized and idealized model of psychosocial agency and ambition vastly beyond realistic considerations (Part IV).

In the final part, I will discuss this shift against the backdrop of wider world cultural transformations emphasizing human rights, human capacity, and human agency. These assertions strongly reflect IOs’ mandates and their ongoing rationalization emblematically underpins their current educational work.

**SHIFTING RATIONALES OF MASS EDUCATIONAL EXPANSION**

In this section, I briefly outline the origins, motives, and patterns of mass educational expansion as documented in almost four decades of institutional research. I identify three shifts in educational expansion. The first shift from religious rationales of educational expansion to national-building rationales, and the second shift from national to mainly economic (often still national economic) expansion. The beginning fourth phase is marked by a denationalized notion of individual development and empowerment.

*From Religious Indoctrination to Modern Nation-State Building*

After studying patterns of early mass educational expansion, institutional research found that despite considerable variance in the degree of industrialization, class structure, and political regime, one after another nascent European nation officially declared its interest in mass education, passed compulsory enrollment legislation, established public education authorities, and public school supervision (Boli & Ramirez, 1987, p. 9).

Explaining this puzzle, the authors stress the emergence of a new state identity resting on the cultural constructs of modern societies: the individual, the national, progress, socialization, and the state, in other words “the secular procedure for constructing the individual” (Boli & Ramirez, 1987; Boli, Ramirez, & Meyer, 1985, p. 150). Major cultural transformations, such as the reformation and counter-reformation, the expansion of capitalism, and the
institutionalization of the state and interstate system, had put in place these myths. They had come to shape a novel nation-state identity, at whose core had been education, and gradually began replacing the faithful subject with the loyal citizen (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000).

The consequences of the worldwide diffusion of such a secular nation-state identity for education are well documented. Pre-primary education has almost tripled since the 1980s (Wotipka, Rabling, Sugawara, & Tongliemnak, 2017). Studies on enrollment in primary and secondary education find universal compulsory primary education legislation worldwide and (formal) enrollment for more than 90% of the world’s children increasing at extraordinary speed, especially in peripheral countries (Meyer, Ramirez, & Soysal, 1992). Primary education is now treated as a human right (Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights). Secondary education has seen even more rapid expansion in most countries around the world. What was once understood as “school leaving” is now understood as “dropout,” or even “pushout,” and everywhere is considered a major social problem (Baker, 2014; Bradley & Renzulli, 2011). For tertiary education, Schofer and Meyer (2005) show strikingly rapid and global growth in tertiary enrollment for the time after World War II, when enrollment expands by factors of ten and twenty. Less developed countries in Africa or Asia now have higher enrolments than did core Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries such as Germany or England 30 years ago.

With regard to political organization, educational authorities have become a universal reality as have those for science (Finnemore, 1993; Ramirez & Ventresca, 1992), and professionalized (often state-controlled) teacher-training is advancing rapidly everywhere in the world, even in places where local realities are little favorable (Meyer, 1998).

**From Nation-State Building to Human Capital**

After World War II, national and international discourses around development had increasingly become dominated by another instrumental view of education and science, this time with a premium on the economic value of education. In such an education and science for development policy model, educational expansion is understood as a national, systemically planned, realist, economically viable, and utilitarian tool to foster progress (Drori et al., 2003). National policymakers, often supported by IOs, regard educational and scientific activity as a guarantor of national development (Chubbott, 2003; Finnemore, 1993; Hwang, 2006).
Along with a massive worldwide educational expansion in general, one of the chief consequences of such a human capital model helps to distinguish the worldwide proliferation of the university as the standard organizational form of educational and scientific activity. One of the key findings in Buckner’s (2016) work on national higher education discourse in the period 1960–2005 is that the first half of that period was marked by clear references to national development. In the second half of that period, however, a shift toward a stronger emphasis on global competitiveness and the global knowledge economy becomes dominant, with states tending to see themselves more as a regulatory agency than the chief funder of higher education. The individual, instead, moves at center stage.

Such an emphasis on the individual is even more pronounced in the concept of LLL, which has dominated the educational agenda on both national (Jakobi, 2006) and international levels (Zapp & Dahmen, 2017) from the mid-1990s until today. LLL is often understood as replacing the egalitarian perspective of the educational system for a (neoliberal) perspective of the learning individual and her responsibilities (Field, 2006; Griffin, 1999). Certainly, notions of employability and individual responsibility are strong themes in pleas for LLL. Yet, as we will see in the empirical part of this work, equally important are notions of general individual development and empowerment through an ever-more “educationalized” life-course, indicating a much more profound cultural transformation.

From Human Capital to Individual Empowerment

Throughout the modern period, education has increasingly become “institutionally chartered to be universal, standardized, and rationalized,” increasingly “institutionalized at a very general collective level,” and “institutionally chartered to conduct the socialization of the individual as the central social unit” (Boli et al., 1985, p. 147). While the two former aspects are easily visible in worldwide structural expansion (educational systems and rights), the latter aspect is reflected in the changing content of educational curricula and changing models of learning and teaching.

Benavot et al. (1991) find that a core of liberal subjects had emerged during 1920–1986, increasingly dominating curricula in highly diverse countries across the world. Similar trends toward the American “social studies” model and a de-territorialized and denationalized curriculum stressing global humanity and the general ecosystem have been backed by several authors (Frank & Gabler, 2006; Rauner, 1998; Wong, 1991). In this model,
the individual is embedded in a rationalized cosmos more than in a religious order, national society, or economy.

Pedagogically, a cross-national shift away from canonical learning toward active student-centered learning is documented for science studies in McEneaney’s (1998) analysis (also Bromley, Meyer, & Ramirez, 2011). Further longitudinal analyses of shifts toward greater student-centeredness, environmentalism, diversity, and human rights in text books over the second half of the 20th century and an increasing institutionalization of human rights at various educational levels, including universities, advance such claims of a more denationalized and self-centered socialization of the individual (Bromley, 2014; Bromley & Suarez, 2012). Earlier educational transformations of people into national citizens and economic agents have begun to give way for themes of transnational personhood and individual capabilities (Ramirez, 2006).

It is the main interest of this analysis to identify support for the hypothesis of an increasing “institutionalization of the individual as the central social unit” at the level of IOs, which themselves can be considered representing a part of the “very general collective level” (Boli et al., 1985, pp. 147–149). We will see that, as IOs’ educational agenda has evolved, not only has the central social unit and focus of attention indeed become the individual, but, more importantly, the underlying model of this individual reflects a surprisingly detailed degree of rationalization, previously only seen in IOs’ analyses of educational systems.

**SHIFTING PHASES IN IOs’ EDUCATIONAL AGENDA**

IOs have long found their place in the study of educational transformations and policymaking. Major concepts from international and comparative education attribute paramount importance to this kind of actor (Chabbott, 2003; Dale, 2005; Lerch, Meyer, & Ramirez, 2016; Mundy, 2007; Parreira do Amaral, 2011) and numerous case studies shed light on the historical evolution of educational work of most of the major organizations involved in education (see Zapp, 2017 for a review).

I argue that, related to the phases of general educational expansion, IOs have shifted their foci in educational thinking, signalling three different phases, which are substantively distinct, yet historically overlapping and interdependent. These phases mark the shift away from an exclusive emphasis on structural educational expansion to a focus on the quality of the structure and the measurement of individual performance within these structures and,
more lately, to more specific theories of the role of the individual learner, now largely disembedded from the structural context.

First Phase: Structural Educational Expansion

Most organizations that have traditionally been involved in educational work are concerned with the primary goal of general educational expansion, although emphases on different educational levels or different forms of educational knowledge may vary over time. Manpower planning and the training of engineers in the 1950s and early 1960s, for instance, were replaced by basic literacy and a focus on gender parity in the 1970s. The EFA initiative and its offspring such as the Fast Track Initiative or (later) the Global Partnership for Education put a premium on neglected social groups in general and primary education (Chabbott, 2003). The rise of LLL brought further technical and vocational education and training, and also put pre-primary education back on the agenda (Zapp & Dahmen, 2017). In 2010, the first United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) conference on early childhood care and education took place. The late 1990s also saw the start of a conference series on higher education led by UNESCO. Such conferences along with the considerable project work, technical assistance, and multilateral aid are general tools to propel the general aim of expanding educational opportunities at all levels for all learners. Symbolic for the great importance attached to education, multilateral education funding increased by more than 10 billion USD from 1995 to 2015 (OECD Creditor Reporting System, 2016).

In the past, such broad calls were often criticized for being too underspecified, lacking concrete recommendations for implementation, reform, and planning. For instance, Boström and Tuijman (2002) note that in an early attempt to establish a discourse on LLL, the OECD (along with UNESCO and the Council of Europe) failed as a result of these organizations, remaining largely abstract and normative in their recommendations rather than prescriptive.

In this first phase, I argue, the ritual educational structuration of the life course prevails, indicated by the dominant (and still important) analysis of formal enrollment ratios and, implicitly, of educational status. What matters here is to have a statistical database providing information on the number of people in certain educational categories (e.g., gross enrollment and graduation rates). Hence, the elaboration and diffusion of standardized descriptions of educational systems such as the International Standard Classification of Education, World Education Indicators, or EFA indicators.
Second Phase: Educational Assessment

Already enshrined in EFA goals, quality marks the chief theme in the second phase. Unsatisfied with the (albeit impressive) educational expansion worldwide, IOs have started, in the late 1990s, to direct attention to the output of education systems. The increase in student achievement assessments is another attempt to create a statistical database, but this time, however, it provides information on the number of people possessing certain competences. The large-scale assessment phase has peaked lately, with all educational levels in countries around the world coming under metric scrutiny and different performance databases becoming integrated (Fig. 1). With the more recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) for Development (2015) and the South East Primary Learning Metrics (2017), almost 150 countries are now routinely assessed. Further, the World Bank is attempting to compile the first genuinely global dataset on student achievement, bringing together high-income area studies such as PISA with lower-income area studies from Latin America and Africa, as well as its own Skills Toward Employment and Productivity (STEP) program that started in 2012 (Zapp, 2017).

Much current comparative education scholarship has made convincing claims about IOs’ normative influence on national educational policymaking through output measuring (Benavot & Meyer, 2013; Gorur, 2014; Wiseman & Stevens-Taylor, 2017). The substantial change in the second phase is that IOs have started to directly shape educational curricula by elaborating universal metrics serving as templates for national reporting and assessment systems (Zapp & Powell, 2016). While the search for quality had triggered the shift away from ritual expansion (first phase) to internal inspection

Fig. 1. The Proliferation of ILSAs Worldwide (Own Account).
(second phase), the focus on the curriculum and competencies leads over to the third phase.

**Third Phase: Individual Psychosocial Development and Empowerment**

IOs’ recent focus on students’ achievement opens new avenues for investigations beyond (important) questions about the consequences of the new “governance by numbers” and by “comparison” for national educational policymaking (Martens, 2007; Ozga, 2008). I argue that IOs’ work on international large-scale testing reflects a growing interest in both educational content (i.e., curriculum) and causal mechanisms of educational achievement. Both questions have brought IOs to a particular role of individuals and their psychosocial qualities. The role of individuals in the development discourse has, since the late 1990s, been increasingly linked to the idea of empowerment with education as the principal tool (Calvès, 2009). A strong involvement of psychology and more recently neuroscience in education have added up to a markedly different educational discourse in the past decade (Anderson & Della Salla, 2012). Such developments have not remained unnoticed by international actors, particularly with regard to childhood conceptions (Schaub, Henck, & Baker, 2017). The World Bank’s World Development Report 2015 was entitled “Mind, Society and Behavior.” Several UN agencies, led by UNICEF, initiated the “The first 1,000 Days Task Team” and UNESCO’s key educational concept of “life skills” features a strong psychosocial component.

Additionally, it has already been noted in the context of LLL that the role of the individual is to be strengthened vis-à-vis the educational system, marking a shift in policy paradigms and extending the educational lifecourse from early childhood to late adult life (Field, 2006; Jakobi, 2006).

I argue that the current educational discourse has visibly shifted toward a strong emphasis on the individual learner documented in a growing interest in mental processes, personality, behavior, and the putative capabilities needed to exercise strong individual agency. This psychological turn starkly contrasts with IOs’ earlier prescriptions of how to reform national education systems and the wider discourse on educational expansion based on religious, national, and economic motives presented in the previous section.

In the empirical part of this article, I will show that all three phases, along with their overriding rationales and consequences for educational analyses, are still present. More precisely, the second and third phases build on top of previous ones adding more complexity and more demands to the analysis.
of IOs’ educational agenda (Fig. 2). While my analysis yields insight into the ongoing relevance of all phases, it is the shift toward the psychosocial empowerment of the individual which has emerged as the core theme in the educational documents from the sample. In the next section, I present the methodology of my analysis before I turn to the presentation of my findings.

**METHODOLOGY**

The sample of IOs consists of organizations actively involved in major educational campaigns and initiatives (e.g., EFA, the Global Campaign for Education Millennium Development Goals). We find here not only most of the major regional and global organizations (e.g., UNESCO, World Bank, and African Union) but also many INGOs (e.g., Education International, ActionAid International) and internationally oriented bilateral development agencies (Agence Française de Développement, USAID). The final sample contains 38 IOs.

Documents were included that made an explicit reference to at least one of the analytical core categories (see below). Included in the sample are the

![Fig. 2. IOs’ Changing Educational Agenda (Own Account).](image-url)
so-called flagship publications and other official documents of high importance, which were made publicly available by IOs. The final document sample contains 60 documents. The Appendix provides a description of the organizations and documents analyzed.

The EFA year 1990 is the starting point for document sampling as it marks the beginning of heightened and concerted interest in this issue among the IO community (Chabbott, 2003). The search process ends with the World Education Forum in 2015, the most recent major global education event.

Analysis was done using theoretically derived overarching categories. These high-level categories refer to the three phases described above (expansion, assessment, and empowerment). For further refinement of key categories, the content analysis tools of constant comparison coding (open, axial, and selective), memo writing, and integration of concepts and categories were applied (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Lower-level categories comprise target groups (Who?), goals (What for?) of educational intervention, and curriculum content (What?). Core categories were, thus, considerably specified with lower-level sub-categories that helped to further integrate data across the 42 IO cases. For descriptive purpose, quantitative indicators are given for the number of IOs referring to a particular analytical category. We now turn to the findings of our analysis structured according to our analytical core categories.

FINDINGS

The First Phase: Expanding Education and LLL For All

We commit to promoting quality lifelong learning opportunities, quality education and training for all, in all settings and at all levels of education. (Incheon Declaration, Art. 10; World Education Forum, 2015)

IOs’ calls for the structural expansion of education systems refer to the inclusion, access, and admission of the groups which have so far remained outside of formal education and the extension of educational trajectories for those already inside national structures. Paradoxically, organizations from the sample direct their calls for expansion to such a myriad of learner populations that it appears little plausible to differentiate between these. This finding deserves further mention.

The most obvious and remarkable criterion which organizations use to select populations is educational. Educational expansion is for both those
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with little education and those at the upper end of the educational ladder. Educational intervention is targeted toward the illiterate, out-of-school children, drop-outs, or early school leavers (African Development Bank (AFDB), 2006, p. 7; 2007b, p. 16; Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), 2007, p. 19; Organization of American States (OAS), 2001, p. 36; Pacific Island Forum (PIF), 2007, p. 12; South Asian Association For Regional Cooperation (SAARC), 2010, p. 37). Mostly at home in richer countries (but not exclusively) are calls for more education for “secondary students, higher education students, PhD students, nontraditional students and the non-skilled” (Council of European Development Bank (CoEDB), 2006, p. 8; European Union (EU), 2012, p. 4). If all these educational criteria are taken together, one might argue that educational expansion is for both “the knowledge-haves and knowledge have-nots” (OECD, 2004a, p. 2) and for both the “educational poor and educational rich” (UNESCO, 2009, p. 43f).

Equally broadly defined are those groups that can be pooled together based on more socioeconomic criteria: the unemployed, the underemployed, the informally employed (often self-employed or rural workers), and the formally employed. While the three first groups are expected to increase their employability through education (and here LLL is frequently mentioned), it should not be surprising that the formally employed workers are also mentioned. This latter group is highly diverse: traditional sector workers, rural workers, manual and non-manual workers, and employees in small- and medium-size enterprises. They all have “to update skills” (European Union, 2000, p. 11) in order to “keep pace with the complexity and dynamics of economic and social development” (Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), 2011, p. 1).

Neither is there a clear pattern when it comes to defining age groups addressed in education documents. References range from the unborn (UNESCO, 2010, p. 43) to older workers (most labor and business INGOs) and the retired (European Union, 2001, p. 13; World Bank, 2003b, p. 58). Education is thought to be apt to address both “youth bulges” (World Bank, 2013, p. 207) and the “aging of our populations” (CoEDB, 2006, p. 8).

If there is any pattern at all in these target groups, it might be the status of being marginalized in some way. This marginalization can be based on gender or location, ethnic and religious background, migration status or disability, conflict-ridden or disaster areas, and diseases. These “most in need” (CAN, 2004), “most vulnerable” (e.g., Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), 2011, p. 24), “under-represented” (e.g., Department for International Development (DFID), 2011c, p. 11), “unreached” (e.g., SAARC, 2010, p. 10), and “underserved” (e.g., International Monetary Fund (IMF), 2012, p. 185)
are, by implication, those with least access to education, and therefore given all the more attention.

What takes shape here is a paradoxical pattern. The more organizations specify their target groups, the more it becomes evident that nobody is missing. Each organization, by making categorical statements, contributes to the *universality* of education. It becomes universal with regard to the life span and the educational, socioeconomic, ethnic, cultural, and geographic background. The very fact that the idea of educational expansion cannot be ascribed to a single, well-defined target population turns it into a far more significant phenomenon as it reveals much wider assumptions and expectations about the learning individual in general.

*The Second Phase: Shifting Attention Toward Curriculum and Competences*

Research assessing the link between the quantity of education (in terms of enrollment or average years of schooling) and economic growth has been encouraging but somewhat mixed, perhaps because ultimately what matters for growth is not the years that students spend in school, but what they learn. (World Bank, 2011, p. 12)

Surprisingly, various IOs, largely missing from the conventional analyses, make considerable efforts to define curricula revolving around competences, basic skills, and life skills (see Table 1).

At first glance, curricular recommendations seem to reflect regional differences in that basic skills (literacy, numeracy, and health education) are more strongly pronounced in the development context. However, where basic skills and life skills are compared with the so-called key competences or meta-competences, differences disappear and a standardized “core curriculum” emerges:

Life skills can be described as “a group of psychosocial competences and interpersonal skills that help people make informed decisions, solve problems, think critically and creatively, communicate effectively, build healthy relationships, empathise with others and cope with and manage their lives in a healthy and productive manner.” (UNESCO, 2007b, p. 56; WHO, 2003)

This resonates with the strong consensus on the importance of the so-called key competences. Many organizations with diverse missions and from diverse geographical areas point to a (often very loosely defined) battery of meta-competences, meta-cognitive skills, or transversal skills. For example, the OECD (1996, pp. 103–121) alone has identified nine cross-curriculum competences, the European Union (2007b) proposes eight, and the UNESCO (2008) 17 competences (Appendix).
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The European Union still remains somewhat subject-based in its curricular portfolio, including linguistic, scientific, and digital competences, whereas both OECD and (even more strongly) UNESCO stress transversal skills. It becomes quite clear that these “competences” go beyond technical skills; they also include knowledge, attitudes, dispositions, values, and emotional aspects. UNESCO (2008) proposes the most complex picture where ideas of oneness and unity even add a specific spiritual and identity aspect, which will be given further attention below.

Interestingly, the centrality of these key competences shed light on the learner’s personality more than on actual subjects or system reforms. They, thus, reflect a more general understanding of what education is to contribute to individual development.

The Third Phase: Focusing on Personality and Psychosocial Capacities

A good part of the variation in achievement tests can be attributed to personality traits or social skills [...]. These personality traits and social skills are critical in predicting individuals’ life outcomes, including educational attainment and earnings. (World Bank, 2013, p. 175)
There is a dramatic emphasis on what education is to bring about in an individual’s life. Education means, above all, empowerment. All organizations mention empowerment and do so repeatedly. Empowerment can be economic, which moves it closer to employability. Economic empowerment or employability are important goals in education documents and can apply to children, youth, women, students, farmers, or, simply, learners. Yet, economic empowerment is always accompanied by the more general idea that people take “ownership and control of their own endeavours and destinies” (WHO, 2007, p. 38). It can also take the form of emancipation, although this latter term is rare and usually applied to women (European Union, 1995, p. 2; JICA, 2010, p. 46) or disadvantaged social groups (DFID, 2004, p. 1).

Such strong calls for empowerment are always linked to the equally strong belief in individuals’ capabilities and potential for personal development. This is true for children where the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is the first step of “the continuum of lifelong learning for children to maximize their potential as individuals and as members of a productive society” (World Bank, 2003a, p. 56).

It also goes for people with disabilities:

The development by persons with disabilities of their personality, talents and creativity, as well as their mental and physical abilities, to their fullest potential; [...] in order to participate effectively in a free society. (DFID, 2011b, p. 20)

Eventually, it becomes clear, again, that it applies to all people:

Education and skills development underpin any strategy of human development and productivity as it is through education that the necessary skills, knowledge and aptitudes are acquired, and the creative abilities of individuals released, to open the way to a better life and society. (IMF, 2012, p. 74)

Education is believed to foster personal development not only in early childhood or initial education but also in the guise of TVET, which “has much to contribute to holistic human development” (ECOSOC, 2011, p. 82). Sometimes “key skills” in the curriculum (see Table 1) become simply “personal development tools” (UNESCO, 2000, p. 66).

The World Bank (2011, p. 13) feels obliged to stress the following:

The development benefits of education extend well beyond work productivity and growth to include better health, reduced fertility, and enhanced ability to adopt new technologies and/or cope with economic shocks, more civic participation, and even more environmentally friendly behavior.

It is within this often vague realm of concrete economic effects on one side and emotional, physical, and mental effects on the other, which turns
education for most organizations into the key element of their strategies. Education is here understood as the ultimate means to reach “personal fulfillment, well-being, and happiness” (European Union, 2011, p. 22). Such statements can even become transcendental:

After all, Happiness in this world and in the Hereafter can be attained when right knowledge is accompanied by ethical action. (Islamic Development Bank (IDB), 2006, p. 24)

In line with such general calls for empowerment and individual development and the broad curriculum that targets individual personality and psychosocial capabilities more than knowledge, numerous organizations go on to paint the strikingly well-contoured profile of a prototype of the modern individual at whose core lies the autonomous actor. Of course, this can be the individual as a learner or student who pursues her studies independently, self-planned, and self-initiated. The empowerment of the learner here means “to build an all-able personality” (League of Arab States (LAS), 2008, p. 32).

The individual learner can also be the future worker when organizations advocate the “empowerment of students to make informed career decisions” (Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS), 2007, p. 24) or encourage them “to take their professional future in their own hands” (AFDB, 2006, p. 19).

If the individual has already entered the labor market, she/he should possess the skills to realize “self-employment opportunities” (European Union, 2000, p. 11; UNESCO, 2010, p. 2).

Organizations from the sample not only agree on the importance of the individual as an empowered actor, they are eager to write “scripts” for this new kind of “actor.” Here it becomes clear that, what starts as the depiction of a new learner type, quickly turns into a much broader desideratum for individuals in general. According to UNESCO (1996, p. 21), the millennium requires a change in general thinking:

In the twenty-first century everyone will need to exercise greater independence and judgement combined with a stronger sense of personal responsibility for the attainment of common goals.

In general, organizations place a dramatic emphasis on the private life of people by establishing a firm link between competences, skills, motivation, and attitudes as, for instance, with entrepreneurship:

Specific psychological traits are associated with entrepreneurship, such as a personal need for achievement, a belief in the effect of personal effort on outcomes, self-confidence, and a positive attitude toward risk. (World Bank, 2013, p. 114)
Entrepreneurship might well be one example of such “psychologicalization,” but it is by no means the sole one. What takes shape, then, is an impressive list of characteristics or personality traits to which organizations from all areas and of all types have something to contribute. Table 2 provides a selection of psychosocial aspects prominent in IOs’ educational documents.

Creativity looms large in the IOs discourse as the most frequently stated trait, followed by the description of the critical and resilient learner. In addition, responsiveness, self-awareness, and assertiveness complete such a “psychograph” of the individual learner.

Together with the competence bundles from above, these lists represent a complex psychological vocabulary of cognitive, social, ethical/moral, behavioral, communicative, and emotional qualities. The terminology becomes difficult to report in its full complexity as the notion of “competences” have become a catch-all term for what might be specified as qualities, traits, dispositions, values, attitudes, capabilities, skills, and abilities. If taken together, European Union (2007b), OECD (1996), OECS (2002, p. 8), SAARC (2007, p. 21), and UNESCO (2008) make for almost 40 different “competence” areas not even including vocational competences.

DISCUSSION

Findings suggest to distinguish between three distinct phases of IOs’ educational work, with each featuring a distinct emphasis. To periodize the phases, the earliest phase has its origins in the founding of many of the IOs from the sample in the post-World War II era, yet with others joining the calls for education expansion only through their involvement in the EFA initiative (Chhabott, 2003). Calls for expansion persist, including all those groups that have not benefitted from earlier waves of enrolment. Expansion is also understood as extension of the educational lifecourse in providing more education to those who are already schooled formally, enlarging the demographics of the “schooled society” (Baker, 2014). The universality inherent in these calls for expansion and extension suggests to focus on the individual learner more than on specific groups of learners underlining IOs’ interest in the quality of systems and the performance of students.

IOs’ second phase started in the 1990s with a heightened interest in the measuring of educational achievements facilitated by advancements in psychology and education sciences. The focus on output (i.e., measurable
competences), the introduction of novel probabilistic, multi-level models, the use psychometric scales (i.e., Rasch model), and better data coverage were partly aided by a strong interest from both countries and IOs in robust educational metrics. The role of the OECD in impacting national reporting, assessment, and research paradigms in general is particularly noteworthy (Zapp & Powell, 2016). This phase has recently peaked with the inclusion of all educational levels and the participation of most countries worldwide in one or even multiple international large-scale assessments,
including the implementation of ever-more internationally harmonized national reporting systems. The strong focus on measuring performance as an attempt to open the black box of the causality between “education” and “national development” has brought IOs to yet another priority on their educational agenda.

The novel focus is on the psychosocial qualities of individual learners. If formal enrollment has little impact on socioeconomic development and if competences (which are assumed to have an impact) depend on individual personality, it is the latter that needs to be addressed in order to finally turn education into the powerful tool it is believed to be. More precisely, findings from both large-scale assessments and decades of national student achievement tests about the ultimate causal variable in explaining the variance in students’ educational performance suggest that personality traits are crucial as they mediate learning-conducive motivated, self-regulated, and attendance behavior (Komarraju, Karau, Schmeck, & Avdic, 2011).

The recommended competences enshrined in a new global “meta-curriculum” include skills, attitudes, dispositions, and values, or, more generally, cognitive, emotional, and psychosocial personality traits, rarely discussed in studies on the relevance of IOs for national policymaking. Consider the OECD’s early statement that the “values, belief systems, habits, and traditions that constitute the very fabric of OECD societies” and the “dispositions, values, and attitudes of individuals” are all within the “realm of legitimate policy intervention” (OECD, 1996, p. 89-ff.). In order to evoke the “intrinsic (instead of instrumental) value of learning (OECD, 1996, p. 86), organizations propose to launch debates for implementing education and learning “in all spheres of public and private life” (European Union, 2000, p. 3).

I argue that we might describe this as a shift from a debate on how to structurally reform educational systems (phase 1) to one of how to reform curricular content, pedagogy, and performance measurement (phase 2), and to a novel, no less controversial debate on the desirable personality conducive of learning (phase 3). In this latter phase, the individual itself moves to center stage reflecting wider cultural transformations. Such a shift remains to be conceptualized in the relevant literature on global education governance and its effects on national policymaking.

Concerning governance, we might assume that along the three phases, IOs’ governance mechanisms increasingly change from hard to soft mechanisms: starting with regulative instruments (e.g., financial means for educational expansion), then moving from normative instruments (measurement in guise of assessments, benchmarks, best practices, etc.) to cognitive or epistemic instruments by providing a universal, standardized, and rationalized model
Beyond Large-Scale Achievement Testing

of the individual learner (not any more the educational system) (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000; Meyer et al., 1997).

Such a shift implies changes in IOs’ impact on national policymaking. The “psychological turn” in IOs’ educational agenda is likely to increase their interest in curricular and pedagogical themes, which have received only little attention in the literature and might represent a promising line of research.

More important in the context of this article is the emergence of a new generation of assessments paying more attention to psychosocial variables. The World Bank’s STEP survey in low- and middle-income countries, for example, includes questions about health and socio-emotional skills. These include 38 personality, behavior, and risk preference items, most prominently the “Big Five” personality traits (e.g., conscientiousness and openness) (World Bank, 2014). Similarly, the OECD (2013) has recently started to encourage national statistical offices to collect data on subjective well-being, including life evaluation, affect, and eudomonia (i.e., a sense of meaning and purpose in life). Moreover, informed by its own PISA data, the OECD (2013) has become interested in tackling the cross-national variance in attitudes toward learning and in how to influence related dispositions and self-beliefs in early childhood.

More generally, the “psychological turn” found in this analysis also touches on issues that relate the role of education to social theory. To begin with, IOs from the sample do not describe real persons but human action as agency and humans as actors. Here, the cultural model of the individual itself undergoes rational elaboration. More precisely, the first consequence of IOs’ analyses is not that people are expected to become successful learners or to reap any of the benefits commonly associated with educational careers (from higher earning rates to lower fertility rates). The first consequence is that people are expected to become an actor, sometimes translated as “to exercise and advance their rights and take control of their destinies” (UNESCO, 2009, p. 38). We might also recall the IMF (2006, p. 108), in the context of LLL, arguing that “every employee becomes an actor in his training course, his professional career and his career development.”

The rationalization effort in IOs’ documents increases, of course, with the complexity in reality. Trapped in the dilemma between universalistic claims of equality and human rights on the one hand, and the highly diverse adopting populations (areas, countries, organizations, cultures, systems, etc.) on the other, the individual arises as the “central social unit” (Boli et al., 1985, p. 147). Instead of contenting themselves with painting what the world should look like and how individuals should fit into this world as before in religious or nationalist versions of educational expansion, the point of departure is the
individual capacity itself, that is, to be unlocked to be able to create her own world (Schaub et al., 2017).

IOs’ “psychological turn” should not be confused with a process of disabling or infantilization by professions or neo-colonial hegemony as in (mostly) earlier critiques (Brock-Utne, 2000; Carnoy, 1974; Illich et al., 1977). Nor does it imply the economization of education or an educational form of governmentality as sometimes feared (Edwards, 2004; Field, 2006; Griffin, 1999; Olssen, 2006).

Instead, I argue the rationalization at work constitutes a process of construction and reconstruction of individualism itself (Meyer, 1986, 2010), which has been, as shown above, with different motives, at the root of earlier waves of educational expansion (Boli & Ramirez, 1987; Boli et al., 1985, p. 150). It is a telling feature of the modern globalized period that non-state actors such as IOs contribute to the construction of an individual beyond the nation-state echoing wider cultural transformations, which support the status of the individual in the contemporary period.

Analyzing the explosion of human rights instruments, Elliott (2007, p. 353), borrowing from Durkheim (1893/1984), speaks of the “cult of the individual for a global society.” While these legal instruments protect the status of the individual as an actor, education lends the capabilities to act. Such actorhood presupposes the universal and egalitarian individual as a quasi-sacred, valuable, and ultimate social entity, making it imperative to include as many of the weak and marginalized as possible. Only then do theories follow that define effective actorhood and agency (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000). The specific capabilities of this “ideal individual” are to be empowered to become the ultimate means and end of social progress. Frequent references to empowerment and creativity, critical awareness, mindfulness, and human rights are particularly noteworthy in this regard.

Characteristic of such rationalization is the degree to which the individual is decontextualized, seemingly disembedded from history, language, tradition, religion, nation and citizenship, tribe, clan, community, family, gender, and other cultural markers reflecting the re-embedding of the learning individual into a new rationalized and cosmopolitan frame (e.g., McEneaney, 1998).

It needs little explanation to claim that such an “imagined individual” holds much potential for decoupling between what people are expected to do and what they actually can and want to do. Institutional research has long observed that national, organizational, and individual practices are routinely decoupled from rationalized models of proper actorhood proliferating worldwide (Jepperson, 2002). The model identified in this study does not subordinate individuals to universalistic knowledge; on the contrary, it
encourages them become active and ambitious participants in the creation of such knowledge.

**CONCLUSION**

The analysis of educational documents from a vast set of IOs in the period 1990–2015 has identified a detailed psychograph of the individual learner. The article argues that such a novel focus indicates a “psychological turn” in IOs’ educational agenda. IOs from the sample do not speak to and about countries, nor about different educational models such as LLL, particularly considering how little is said about precise policies to create or reform educational systems. I propose, instead, that the value ascribed to the individual in educational thinking helps explain the “psychological mood” IOs are currently in. In the earlier period, education served development, and often national development. In the more recent neoliberal period, nation-states disappear as sovereigns in distinct national societies, and the individual becomes globalized as the cultural project.

Beyond the reform recommendations related to states’ educational responsibilities and the measurement of learning achievements, IOs have directed attention to the individual mindset, turning education from a mere manifesto of the learner into a psychosocial toolkit for the modern learning individual as an autonomous actor. With this move, IOs have left the policy level and entered an anthropological discussion.

Educational documents display an idealized and idolized imagery of a learner that includes what people should know, be able—to do, to think, to feel, to have opinion on—in short, to be like. In modernity, the individual itself becomes a rationalized myth, representing the climax of a century-long historical–cultural drama of modernity with education at its heart. The hero of this drama is the individual. As with all heroes, they are generously equipped with the capabilities that greatly exceed those of ordinary human beings.

**NOTES**

1. See UNESCO (2016), Global Campaign for Education (2016), and UN (2016) for member organizations in these networks.
2. The analysis is part of a related project. The complete coding structure, including the specific references per category, is available upon request.
REFERENCES


## APPENDIX: ORGANIZATION AND DOCUMENT SAMPLE

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Sample and Characteristics of Organizations

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