

The Faltering of “Global” and International Norms in Education: Reading the 2023 UNESCO Recommendation through the Reconfiguration of World Order and Knowledge Infrastructures

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Research Overview

This study examines how international educational norms have been historically conditioned by changing world orders and knowledge infrastructures. Reading the 2023 UNESCO Recommendation against the 1974 Recommendation, it argues that the proliferation of normative vocabularies today reflects the destabilisation—not the strengthening—of the conditions sustaining “global” educational norms.

Purpose of Study

Eighty years after the founding of the United Nations, the international normative architecture is losing its self-evidence. Geopolitical rivalry, the retreat from multilateralism, populist backlash against liberal values, the contestation of DEI agendas, digital fragmentation, and the rapid expansion of artificial intelligence are reshaping the conditions under which global educational norms can be authorised. Yet international organisations continue to produce normative texts at an accelerating pace: UNESCO’s *Rethinking Education* (2015), *Reimagining Our Futures Together* (2021), the *Transforming Education Summit* (2022), and the 2023 Recommendation on Education for Peace, Human Rights, International Understanding, Cooperation, Fundamental Freedoms, Global Citizenship and Sustainable Development—adopted by consensus among 194 Member States.

This study asks three interrelated questions. First, how have the structural conditions sustaining international educational norms changed from the 1974 Recommendation to the 2023 Recommendation? Second, do contemporary normative vocabularies—“global common good,” “new social contract,” “transformative education,” “conviviality,” “global citizenship,” “care”—represent genuine reconstruction, or institutional responses to declining normative authority?

Third, what does the Japanese trajectory of receiving and translating these norms reveal about the multilayered mediation of “global” in education today?

Research Methods

The study combines comparative historical analysis with critical discourse analysis. Theoretically, it draws on Martin Wight’s Realist/Rationalist/Revolutionist traditions to read shifting world-order configurations, on globalisation and neoliberal governance scholarship to examine the economisation of education, on postcolonial critiques (Andreotti, Tikly) to interrogate the geopolitics of universalist claims, and on Foucault’s regimes of truth to analyse epistemic legitimacy. Recent scholarship on the entanglement of UNESCO, the OECD and the World Bank (Elfert and Ydesen, 2023), on UNESCO’s Futures of Education Report (Klees, 2022), and on world-order modelling (McKeil, 2022) is integrated. Empirical material comprises five UNESCO normative texts (1974, 2015, 2021, 2022, 2023), parallel OECD discourses on global competence and transformative competencies, and participant-observational data from the ongoing collective Japanese translation of the 2023 Recommendation—a process that began immediately after adoption in November 2023 and has now produced its third revised edition.

Results and Discussion

Three historical phases emerge. In the postwar normative phase, the 1974 Recommendation operated within a Rationalist international society of sovereign states; education was widely understood as a normative public institution, even where Cold War politics constrained implementation. Comparative country evidence indicates that the 1974 norms were institutionalised as an “operating system” for civic and human-rights education in Nordic countries and Germany, while in Japan they were translated into the milder vocabulary of “international understanding” and remained marginal to the curricular core. In the neoliberal-global phase from the 1990s, education was repositioned as human-capital formation, and OECD discourse rose to prominence; UNESCO and OECD vocabularies have since partially converged, with the OECD adopting humanistic registers (well-being, agency, transformative competencies) while UNESCO has internalised measurement and indicator logics.

The present phase is one of structural fragmentation. Vocabularies multiply—common good,

social contract, conviviality, transformation, care—while the political, epistemic and educational infrastructures that once authorised such norms are weakening. A central analytical claim of the study is that the very breadth and elasticity of these contemporary vocabularies enable consensus precisely because they license divergent interpretations across different positionalities. The wider and more abstract the term, the more readily it absorbs incompatible national, institutional and ideological readings beneath a shared linguistic surface. From this angle, the 2023 Recommendation’s adoption “by consensus” among 194 Member States may be read not as the convergence of meaning but as its productive dispersion: an agreement made possible by the very ambiguity of its key terms. National positionalities articulated during the drafting deliberations—Japan emphasising ESD, the Republic of Korea pressing GCED, the Russian delegation contesting transformative education—illustrate how this elasticity functions in practice.

The Japanese case further illuminates contemporary dynamics. Unlike the 1974 reception, the 2023 Recommendation is being formally embraced by the Ministry of Education and articulated with ESD and the next Course of Study revision. Yet awareness and substantive penetration beyond specialist networks remain limited, and the very act of translating foundational concepts—right to education, conviviality, common good—has generated sustained interpretive disputes between governmental and scholarly renderings. Policy endorsement, in other words, does not translate into broad social or epistemic uptake when knowledge infrastructures themselves are fragmenting.

The deeper transformation lies in the changing regime of truth. Knowledge once substantially monopolised by states, codified through education systems, and authorised by professional communities is now produced, circulated and contested across digital platforms and, increasingly, by AI systems. In a post-truth environment, truth itself is positionally constructed; states—including Japan, currently establishing a new national security intelligence framework—attempt to re-monopolise knowledge precisely as that monopoly becomes structurally untenable. The study contributes to comparative and international education scholarship in three ways: by reconceptualising global educational norms as historically contingent products of changing political and epistemic infrastructures rather than stable moral frameworks; by situating contemporary UNESCO–OECD discourses within the broader transformation of world order; and by foregrounding the declining coherence of institutional norm production in an age when

knowledge infrastructures themselves are being reconfigured. Ultimately, the study suggests that the future of global educational norms depends less on the proliferation of new normative vocabularies than on whether new forms of political legitimacy, epistemic authority, and educational mediation can be reconstructed under post-global conditions.

Keywords

UNESCO 2023 Recommendation; international educational norms; world order; regimes of truth; comparative education in Japan