Policy entrepreneurs in the global education complex: The case of Finnish education experts working in international organisations

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the perceived role of Finnish education experts working in development cooperation for education. We interviewed 31 education experts working in international organisations representing Finland. A theoretically pluralist approach is utilised combining complexity thinking with a multiple streams approach. The analysis demonstrates that the context of educational development cooperation is ambiguous and complex. Influencing policymaking is a strategic, non-linear task which takes time, resources, and personal skills. Policy entrepreneurs need to understand the dynamics of development cooperation, identify actors that trust them, and recognise when policy windows are likely to open.

1. Introduction

Finland has a long history of involvement in international development cooperation, starting as early as the 1800s with work by the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission in the education and health sectors (Takala, 1998; Valjas et al., 2008). Since the 1960s, Finland's Ministry for Foreign Affairs has led and increased its participation in development cooperation initiatives (Takala, 1998; Lamberg, 2020). Although on a small scale (proportional to the country's economic possibilities), the involvement in these initiatives was largely 'motivated by the will to join the arenas of international politics surrounding development cooperation and become a nation among nations' (Lamberg, 2020, p. 2).

In the early 2000 s Finnish students' good results in the earlier cycles of the OECD's PISA survey (2000–2012) catapulted this small Nordic country onto the map of education excellence, turning Finland not only into 'a nation among nations' (Lamberg, 2020, p. 2) but *the nation* of education, a benchmark for best practice in education policy and a source of inspiration for international organisations and countries alike. These began to look to Finland for examples of good policy that could lead to the improvement of education systems throughout the world (e. g. Santos and Centeno, 2021; Waldow, 2017; Takayama et al., 2013; Ringarp and Rothland, 2010).

In recent years the Finnish international success has faded. Finland has been overtaken by East Asian countries and economies like Singapore, Japan, South Korea, and Shanghai. Given this new context,

we investigate the role and strength of the voice of Finnish education experts in *global education policy* (Verger et al., 2018) in the context of development cooperation. In this article we ask:

> How do Finnish education experts working in international organisations influence education policy in the complex environments of development cooperation?

To answer this question, we interviewed 31 Finnish nationals identified as education experts in development cooperation. We sought to understand these experts' perceptions of their influence and impact within the policy arenas of their organisation's headquarters and country offices.

We used a pluralist theoretical approach with the aim of bringing a new perspective to the field of development studies, which frequently focus on topics related to political economy (e.g. Rutkowski, 2007; Hill and Kumar, 2012; Robertson, 2012; Engel et al., 2019), such as the role of education in economic grown. Our analysis was guided by a combination of the onto-epistemological stance of complexity thinking (e.g. Cilliers, 1998) with the multiple streams approach (Kingdon, 2003). Complexity constitutes this study's onto-epistemic stance. It is the research paradigm informing the analysis of the education experts' understandings about their interactions with other actors in their professional environment. Multiple streams approach emerged as a potential useful analytical tool during the process of analysing the interviews. More specifically, after a preliminary analysis of our data we realised that the Finnish education experts we interviewed could be understood

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as policy entrepreneurs. They work and attempt to influence policy and decision making within complex and intertwined systems, namely, international organisations, the international architecture of development cooperation, the donor (mostly in the Global North) and receiver (mostly in the Global South) countries, and these countries' education systems. Phenomena within and across these systems are non-linear, ambiguous, uncertain, and unpredictable, which requires these experts to constantly monitor policy opportunities, adapt to and, self-organise in response to events taking place in the above systems and their environments.

The article develops as follows. The next section reviews the literature and clarifies how we define 'expertise' and 'influence' and the role they play in development cooperation. Section 3 presents the theoretical background constructed for this analysis. Section 4 presents the data and methods used in this study. Section 5 and the subsequent subsections present and discuss the findings. The final section presents the study's conclusions.

2. Reflection on the role of expertise and influence in development cooperation

In this section we discuss the phenomenon this article analyses: expertise and influence within the complex of development cooperation in the education sector. We start by investigating the concepts of 'expertise' and 'influence'. This is followed by a discussion of the role of individuals deployed by international organisations' member states to represent the aims of their country in the context of development cooperation in the education sector.

2.1. The concepts of 'expertise' and 'influence'

The definition of the concepts of 'experts' and 'expertise' is disputed. In line with Shanteau (1992, p. 255), in this study we consider 'experts' as people 'recognised within their profession as having the necessary skills and abilities to perform at the highest level'. This corresponds to what Collins and Evans (2007) call *contributory expertise* in the sense that these experienced experts can 'carry out an activity with skills in a specialised field'. This expertise is built in five stages: 'novice, advanced beginner, competence, proficiency, and expertise' (Normand, 2022, p. 32). In this study we focus on professional experts. Wilson (2006) defines the expert in this category as 'someone who combines theoretical knowledge and experiential (tacit) knowledge that is derived from professional practice'.

On one hand the assessment of experts' performance can be made by retrospectively observing how well a task was completed or a product designed based on feedback, or through competitions and rating systems (Chi, 2006, p. 21). On the other 'expertise' can also be evaluated through assessments of knowledge where more knowledgeable individuals are considered 'experts' and others 'novices'. This knowledge can also be assumed through academic qualifications, 'seniority or years performing the task, or consensus among peers' (Chi, 2006, pp. 22–23). This latter form of assessment, with Shanteau's (1992), Wilson's (2006), and Normand's (2022) definitions of 'expert', was the tool this study deployed to identify Finnish education experts working – or who had recently worked – in international organisations (see more in Section 4, Data and methods).

The role and influence of professional experts in policymaking and decision making such as those interviewed for this study, have also been discussed in literature, without consensus. For example, studies in education argue that advice from professional experts – such as teachers – is often not considered even after years of evidence and knowledge building. Other studies demonstrate that people placed in high-level technocratic positions seem to play a more influential role (Brint, 1990, pp. 362–363).

Influence can therefore be broadly defined as the ability of a person or group to steer decisions in conformity with their own interests (Dür,

2008, p. 2). When strategically networked, skilled experts may play a relevant role in the development and interpretation of knowledge. As such they can play an influential role in decision making at various levels of policy and practice: experts can have 'a specific activity of knowledge production participating in the process of negotiation and orientation of public policy' (Normand, 2017, p. 74, in Rinne et al., 2018). Expertise can therefore be influential because experts, informed by evidence – and their own ideologies and interests – get involved in policy processes by highlighting certain problems and offering solutions for the presented problems. Experts can thus be seen as taking the role of policy entrepreneurs (as described by Kingdon, 2003 – see Section 5 of this paper).

In development cooperation, as in many other fields, experts are placed at various levels of the development cooperation complex. These include the policy level of international organisations, where experts may influence organisations' broad agendas, or at organisations' country offices, where experts may influence the country's decision making, or in the local community, where policies are enacted. Independently of the context where the experts are working, they must walk the path along the various stages of expertise from novice to experienced, and they must become familiar with their community dynamics, ways of acting and reasoning, and absorb the 'stock of knowledge' required to earn trust and be considered an 'expert' among other community members (Normand, 2022). This necessary process of adaptation to the experts' new community is characterised by ambiguity and unpredictability and requires a humble attitude of learning with others and construction of synergies between experts' aims and values and those of the context in which the expert is placed (Wilson, 2008; Normand, 2022). Only through these processes can experts become influential.

2.2. The education development cooperation complex and the ambiguous dynamics of influence

In recent decades the interconnections and interdependence of people, organisations, regions, and countries across societal systems (economic, legal, educational, health, etc.) have become more intense and complex (Verger et al., 2018). Ydesen (2019) argues that this growth in the interdependences of an increasingly diverse number of stakeholders in global policy governance, their collaboration, and/or competitiveness has led to the emergence of a 'contemporary governing complex in education' (p. 2). Similarly, Menashy (2018) posits that although global development often seems to be described as a system, with its well defined 'boundaries, positionalities, and relational processes' (p. 44), the degree of complexity of this 'system' has significantly increased in recent decades because of 'more agencies using more money and more frameworks to deliver more projects in more countries with more partners…' (p. 44), leading to 'hypercollective action' (Severino and Ray, 2010, p. 12). These organisations use tools such as international assessments and rankings, funding for the development of education systems, policy advice and consultancy, and the definition of benchmarks for educational achievement (Altback, 1988; Akkari and Lauwerier, 2015) to pressure governments worldwide to drive public policies in certain directions.

A good example of such a 'complex' or 'hypercollective action' is the Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which currently engages and guides most actors involved in cooperative international development initiatives, and which is coordinated by a range of organisations, steering groups, and several other mechanisms and events. The coordination of SDG4 – quality education – was assigned to UNESCO, which established the Global Education Cooperation Mechanism, an umbrella group that covers this SDG's coordination architecture. It includes the SDG4 – Education 2030 Steering Committee, Global Education Meetings, Regional Meetings, the Collective Consultation of NGOs on Education 2030, and the Global Education Monitoring Report (UNESCO, 2020, 2021, 2022).

The previous literature has highlighted two main issues (e.g. Evers

and Gerke, 2005) regarding international organisations' development cooperation initiatives and the experts working in these organisations. First, the professional experts involved in development cooperation led by international organisations are usually people from the countries of the Global North, often with professional expertise acquired solely in their home countries. this has been criticised because it frequently means these organisations' initiatives tend to ignore the expertise of professionals in the Global South host countries, often failing to acknowledge these local professionals' knowledge which was developed in their life, education, and professional experience in the context of intervention (Tiessen et al., 2018).

Second, derived from the above, international initiatives have been criticised for their tendency to reduce these countries' ability to decide on their own public systems, leading to international dynamics understood by many as neo-colonialist (e.g. Sultana, 2019, p. 3; Menashy, 2018). Such dynamics can lead to conflicting relations between local actors and the international experts deployed to work in these contexts, and can deliver unsustainable results that may lead to stagnation or even reversals in these countries' development (e.g. Szekely and Mason, 2018).

In this article we present an analysis of how Finnish education experts seconded to – or until recently working in – international organisations to represent Finland, perceive the dynamics of their work, and how they understand their influence (or otherwise) on both a) these organisations' decision making and b) policymaking in the Global South contexts in which they often work.

3. Theoretical background

For this study we constructed a theoretically pluralist approach to analyse the perceptions of Finnish education experts about their work dynamics and influence. Our approach combines the onto-epistemic perspective of complexity thinking as the research paradigm (e.g. Cilliers, 1998; Morrison, 2006; Mason, 2008, 2014; Bates, 2016) with the lenses of the multiple streams approach (Kingdon, 2003; see also e.g. Zahariadis, 1998; Herweg et al., 2015, 2018) – more specifically, the concept of policy entrepreneurs.

3.1. Complexity thinking

Complexity thinking emerged in the field of the natural sciences, was largely developed by the advance of computational sciences, and has increasingly gained the attention of researchers in the social sciences (Medd, 2002; Morrison, 2006; Cairney et al., 2019). It enables the analysis of the system elements' interactions (e.g. education experts involved in development cooperation) to understand the complexities manifested at the system level (Cilliers, 1998; Cairney et al., 2019). Complexity theories examine the networks and intertwinements of vast numbers of elements of complex systems and their environments, accounting for these elements' ability to adapt and self-organise and their systems' interdependence with other social systems, as well as the ambiguity, uncertainty, and unpredictability of the processes taking place inside and across systems (e.g. Santos, 2022; Cairney et al., 2019; Bates, 2016; Morrison, 2006). Complexity thinking also understands systems and the interactions between their elements as chaotic and non-linear, compromising the rationality of these elements' decision making (Goldspink, 2007). Complexity thinking thus views the actors involved in social phenomena as able to apply only limited rationality to their decisions. This rationality is contingent on the information available to these actors, and how much of it they can process within tight time constraints (Goldspink, 2007).

The complexity thinking approach brings to the research process an understanding of the international organisations, the architecture of education development, education systems, and the countries where international organisations intervene as complex systems interdependent on one another. This stance is useful to inform the analysis on how

actors interact with others in their professional environment and try, through these interactions, to influence not only the decisions made within these organisations but also policymaking in the countries where they are often deployed. Within these complex and fluid systems, actors have to accommodate their organisation's agenda as well as that of the actors in their intervention context and often the agenda of their own countries. This requires these experts have the ability to be strategic, cope with ambiguity, and self-organise according to emergent events in their environment. Thus, Complexity thinking informs not only how we understand the professional environment of these experts, but also furthers our understanding by addressing the complexity of the context (of development cooperation) with theories that are also complex, as Craps et al. (2019) argues, addressing complexity with complexity.

3.2. Multiple streams approach

The multiple streams approach (MSA) is embedded on complexity. John Kingdon and his team developed it in the 1980s, inspired by the garbage can model by Cohen et al. (1972), which understands organisations as organised anarchies, characterised by dynamism and chaos, fluid participation, problematic preferences and unclear technology, and the processes within these organisations as non-linear and non-rational (Cohen et al., 1972).

Although the MSA was constructed to analyse policy agenda setting in the US Congress (Kingdon, 2003; Moulton and Silverwood, 2018), it has been expanded to the analysis of other phases of the policy process, such as policy formulation or implementation, and other contexts such as parliaments, political parties, and the European Union (e.g. Santos and Kauko, 2020; Novotný and Polášek, 2016; Ackrill et al., 2013). Unlike theories that see the policy process as linear and rational, Kingdon's approach, in line with the garbage can model, argues that the policy process is complex, chaotic, and dynamic, involving a diversity of actors with various ideologies and interests at various governance levels and policy communities, who interact cooperatively or in competition (Sabatier, 2007; Cairney et al., 2019). These actors are characterised as having a bounded rationality because they can only address a small number of problems, are informed by the small amount of information they can access and process, are conditioned by reduced timeframes, and move in ambiguous and uncertain contexts in which participants often change (Sabatier, 2007). These features can lead the actors involved in the policy process to policy preferences that are problematic and unsuitable (e.g. Zahariadis, 2007; Jones et al., 2016; Herweg et al., 2018).

The MSA understands the policy process is comprised of five elements: policy windows, policy entrepreneurs and three independent streams: problem, policy, and politics (Kingdon, 2003). The problem stream refers to issues or events (situations) that are understood to be problems that need addressing; the policy stream accounts for the solutions for which various actors advocate; finally, the politics stream is the context in which the policy process takes place (Kingdon, 2003). The three streams do not couple frequently, so attentive policy entrepreneurs identify policy windows in which the three streams combine, or they try to combine the streams themselves, leading to the opening of policy windows. Policy windows are brief and rare; policy entrepreneurs take situations that are perceived as problems or frame them as problems themselves, offer their pet policy solutions to busy policymakers, and attempt to convince them to advocate for one or more of these solutions. Policy entrepreneurs work on softening up these solutions during agenda setting until they earn the support of enough people to advocate for these solutions at the right tables (Zahariadis, 2007, p. 74; Herweg et al., 2018, pp. 28–29).

Although the MSA has been used significantly in the analysis of national contexts, the approach has been less used in international organisations (Sumida, 2017). Exceptions to this include the work of Lipson (2007), who analyses how policy entrepreneurs succeed in pushing peacekeeping onto the agenda of the UN Security Council; in the work of Ackrill and Kay (2011) on the role of policy entrepreneurs in the 2005

European Union sugar reform; and in the work of Sumida (2017), who analyses the policy path of the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development from an idea to being on the UN agenda.

We consider that to understand the dynamics of agenda setting in such complex systems, it is fundamental to understand the dynamics of influence and the strategies used to propel an idea onto the policy agenda. In the present analysis the Kingdon's concept of policy entrepreneur is used to focus the analysis on the perceptions of the interviewed Finnish education experts. This, because, through the initial data analysis we realised that the descriptions the interviewees gave of their work dynamics can be closely associated with the descriptions Kingdom (2003) made of what is a policy entrepreneur (which is described in detail in the next Section 3.3).

3.3. National education experts as policy entrepreneurs in the global education development complex

Experts working in global development cooperation, including in the education sector, are informed by the principles and aims of global agreements (such as the SDGs), their organisations' aims, and frequently the aims of the national governments that might have deploy them. The experts participating in our study can be seen as agents for policy change, and thus, they can be analysed as policy entrepreneurs in the sense that they have the knowledge and resources to inform and steer decision making (Kingdon, 2003), but none was at a level where they actually decided what should be on the agenda. Interestingly, the MSA argues that the position of policy entrepreneurs may be less relevant than other features, as they can be found in a range of locations in formal and informal positions (Kingdon, 2003, pp. 179–180).

Furthermore, following the MSA, as important as the experts' knowledge in a certain field might be, so are their personal skills and the quality of their networks, as no single individual effects change in isolation (Kingdon, 2003, pp. 180–181). To be successful in their policy advocacy journey, policy entrepreneurs must first have already built a voice on a certain topic (demonstrated expertise), be in a position in which they represent others, or be in a position in which they wield power in the institution; second, they must have relevant political networks and be recognised for this by others; third, entrepreneurs are persistent, spending a great amount of time sharing their policy solutions with others by 'giving talks', 'writing papers', 'drafting bills', or 'having lunch' with relevant actors, for example (Kingdon, 2003, pp. 180–181).

The education experts participating in this study are (or were) in positions where Finland is responsible for deployment and funding salaries (through secondment or junior professional officer positions), or they started their careers in such positions. They are at various stages of their careers and at different levels of their organisation's hierarchy. The MSA, and more specifically the concept of policy entrepreneurs, informs the analysis of the interviewees' perception of how they act, network with other actors, and attempt to influence the agendas of the environments in which they work, the strategies they believe are key to enabling their influence, and the conditions that challenge it.

The theoretical strategy of aggregating complexity with multiple streams approach also enables us to distinguish this study from other development studies which frequently are partially or entirely focused on topics related to, for example, political economy (e.g. Rutkowski, 2007; Hill and Kumar, 2012; Robertson, 2012; Engel et al., 2019) such as the role of education in economic grown. In this study we attempt to focus on an aspect that have rarely been discussed in development cooperation: education experts' perceptions about how they interact with others in their work environment and what strategies they apply when they want to influence the education policy agenda in both, international organisations headquarters and country offices.

4. Methods and data

This qualitative study develops through a content analysis (Schreier, 2014) of 31 semi-structured thematic interviews with Finnish education experts who recently worked or still work in international organisations (such as UN agencies, the World Bank, the GPE, etc.). In addition, as secondary data we analysed Finnish policy documents with the goal of identifying the main focuses and aims of Finland's involvement in development cooperation in the education sector.

The interviews took place between February and March in 2022, and the participants were identified using a snowball strategy, starting with experts identified by the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs. These experts identified other Finnish education experts who were working or recently worked in education development in international organisations. We thus built a strategy to identify Finnish education experts who, merged the definitions of experts presented by Shanteau (1992), Chi (2006), and Wilson (2006) – explained in Section 2 and subsequent subsections - leading us to include experts recognised by their colleagues as experts, and who demonstrated strong knowledge, skills, and performance in development cooperation in the education sector.

The interviewees are professional experts with extensive experience in development cooperation in the sector of education, rather than being necessarily considered experts due to their academic background. In fact, although all interviewees have at least a master degree, only eight of them have an academic background in education. The other participants were educated in development studies, development economy or international law, among others. The majority of the interviewees are or have been in the past seconded by the Finnish government into these organisations as country representatives through programmes such as JPO (Junior Professional Officer Programme) or UNV (United Nations Volunteer Programme). At the time of the interviews, most of the participants held a senior position in an international organisation's country offices (45%), 32% were in senior positions in their organisation's headquarters, 23% were in junior positions in country offices, and none was in a junior position in an international organisation's headquarters (see Fig. 1).

The interviews explored the participants' perceptions by themes such as 'reflection on their work impacts', 'education development challenges', and 'dynamics of development cooperation in education'.

The interviews' qualitative content analysis combined deductive and inductive approaches, in which some codes considered fundamental to answer the research question were created beforehand (e.g. 'academic background', 'perspectives on own influence', 'role of international organisations', etc., which were then complemented by sub-codes emerging from the readings of the data (e.g. 'academic background: development studies' 'perspectives on own influence: network building'; 'role of international organisations: create awareness'. This strategy enabled the exploration of these experts' views about how they develop dynamics of influence within their host organisations, as well as the contexts in which they were placed in Global South countries and their promotion of the Finnish agenda for development cooperation in the education sector.

5. Findings and discussion

In this section we present and discuss our findings in relation to three aspects: based on the analysis of Finnish policy documents, (1) we identify the Finnish agenda (focus and aims) for development cooperation in the education sector to situate the Finnish aims within the global architecture of development cooperation in education; and based on the interviews, we discuss the Finnish education experts' perceptions of (2) the dynamics of their influence within international organisations' headquarters and (3) in the context of the Global South, where they often work(ed).
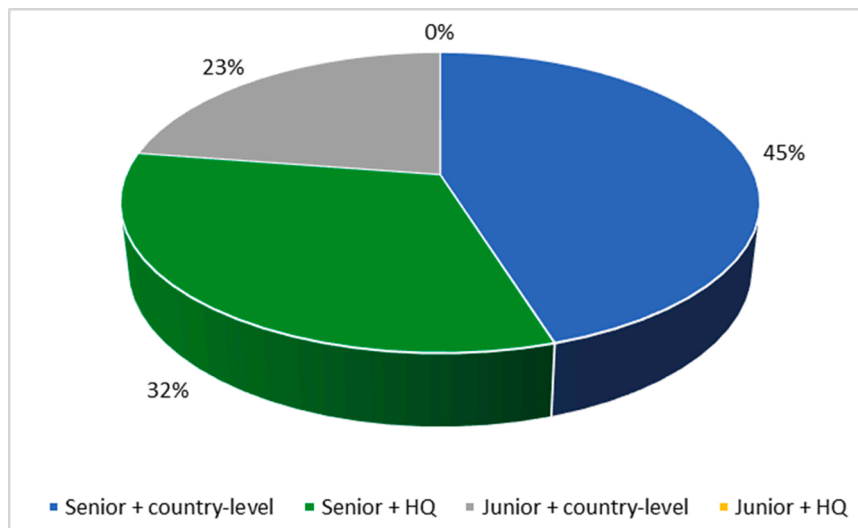
Fig. 1. Seniority and location of the interviewees in the international organisation.

5.1. The Finnish involvement in development cooperation

Finland has long been involved in international development cooperation initiatives through both international organisations and bilateral agreements directly with specific countries (e.g. Takala, 1998; Reinikka et al., 2018). Nevertheless, it was with the early 2000′s *PISA boom* that the country's active participation in international organisations, including in development cooperation intensified to a large extent driven by international recognition of its education system's quality. However, compared with other countries, this participation has been limited in regard to the funding and human resources available. Our interviewees recognise these limitations and posit that this small availability of resources impacts the relevance Finnish experts have within many international organisations. This is well expressed in the quotation below:

> Finnish individuals have a good reputation within international organisations, but they are still very much like a subgroup compared to many other nationalities, and also the fact that Finland is not equally big of a donor compared to other governments, lessens a bit the role of the Finnish individuals within these organisations.[1] (Interviewee 13)

Some of the interviewees even go further in saying that, indeed, PISA is the only reason why Finland has any voice internationally:

> Finland is of course a small player. It gets its strength only because everybody is admiring its system, otherwise you wouldn't pay attention. It's the only thing, it's the PISA results they do speak about. (Interviewee 8).

Overtime, the education sector has alternated, within Finland's development cooperation policies, between more and less prominent positions. Currently, the *Report on Development Policy Across Parliamentary Terms* (MFA, 2021) specifies education as one of the country's five key areas of development policy, along with 'rights of woman and girls' 'sustainable economies and decent work' 'peaceful democratic societies' and 'climate change, biodiversity, sustainable management, and use of natural resources'. They are followed by four cross-cutting objectives: 'gender equality', 'non-discrimination', 'climate resilience and low emission development', and 'environmental protection' (MFA, 2021). In the education sector Finland focuses on teacher education and equity on

the access to quality basic, secondary, and vocational education and training, with a particular emphasis on the education of girls and other vulnerable groups (MFA, 2021). These key areas and objectives are clearly aligned with diverse international documents related to cooperation development, including the *Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development* (UN, 2015).

5.2. Finnish education experts' dynamics of influence in international organisations

There is a diversity of perspectives among the interviewed experts about whether they are influential actors within international organisations. Most novice experts argue that as they are at the bottom of the hierarchy, they hold little power to influence their organisation's decisions and practices However, they also believe they will become more influential as they prove themselves, demonstrate their capacities and knowledge, and thus earn trust within their organisation's community. The following quotation demonstrates this clearly:

> … since I'm only working… as a junior, I feel like I'm not always involved in everything… At least until now. So … maybe my position doesn't allow me to impact as much as I would sometimes like to. But I know that this is how the process goes, so of course I need to prove myself first and then maybe move forward in the organisation. (Interviewee 10)

However, the senior experts interviewed are unanimous in having a more nuanced view of the influence an individual has in large organisations. They point out that even if they have a senior position in the organisation hierarchy that gives them a voice in decision making, the influencing process is long and complex. These experts argue that neither the agenda of large international organisations nor their work culture can be changed easily or by a single individual. This concurs with the MSA's view that entrepreneurs' work is complex and non-linear and requires individuals' time and the ability to network with relevant people, as no change is undertaken by a single individual. One of our interviewees argues humorously that they need to be strategic, knock at the right doors, and network with the right people; otherwise, they will be wasting their time and energy.

> Three things happen if an education expert in the World Bank or OECD or European Commission or any organisation tries to change their policies and values. One is that you're going to lose your friends. The second is that your life expectancy will decrease. And the third is that nothing will change anyway. So, the best thing you

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[1] - The interview quotations have been edited slightly to aid comprehension, while departing as little as possible from the verbatim transcripts.

can do if you are a Finnish education expert in a large organisation is not to try to change the organisation's values or strategies or policies directly. It isn't going to happen. So, what you need to do… is to find the right person who wants to listen to you, one of the directors serving the board of the… [organisation], and you have to help those people understand there's a better way to see the function we're performing. (Interviewee 6)

Nevertheless, some of the experts also believe that as Finnish nationals they have a different way of doing things and thinking. They therefore feel they can have an impact and a voice simply because of these ways of acting and thinking.

I would say that the people who are working in the international organisations and come from Finland are making an impact through their own work. Because they're bringing the Finnish attitude and Finnish way of educating, so we're trying to make an impact through our different way of thinking… (Interviewee 1)

Meanwhile, some interviewees question the importance of nationality in their work in these organisations. They argue that Finnish education experts do not need a stronger voice because Finland is a small player in these arenas, invests little funding, and deploys a small number of experts to work in these organisations as its representatives. In addition, a few of these experts argue that they simply happen to be Finnish nationals and to be working in an international organisation, and their *Finnishness* is irrelevant. One of these experts even asks, *'What is Finnishness today?'* (Interviewee 4).

More moderately than the perspectives presented above, experts also posit that they believe they are influential and impactful, but not under the aims of their country. Rather, they need to follow their own organisation's priorities.

I mean of course at organisational level you create strategy, and you have various priorities, but when you're the lead of the sector, you're of course the one who is in charge of actually elaborating what gets funded. So yes, it's a significant impact, at least on that level. But of course, you do it within the framework of what your organisation sees as a priority. (Interviewee 7)

The experts also highlight that becoming influential within international organisations is greatly related to a person's skills. They say that one needs to be both humble and proactive in these organisations, have good communication skills, and be able to build a strong network of relations across levels and open to collaborate and learn from the people with whom one networks. For example, one of the experts mentions the importance of some of these personal features.

You cannot go with this superior mindset, that you know it all, you have all the solutions, but it's rather about being very sensitive and being able to work within that. I cannot emphasise enough the importance of … diverse teamwork, but it's really like how you work well in diverse teams and organisations, what's the mindset. But then you also need to have that solid professional base, so that what you express is actually based on professionalism, ideally research, as well as being open-minded about it. I think an organisation like the World Bank … I was wondering why it was repeatedly mentioned, like remember to network like … do you go for a coffee even if you feel like you have deadlines to meet? Go and talk to people, get to know them. (Interviewee 4)

Finally, the interviewed experts say that without the constant support and guidance of the Finnish government it is difficult for any expert to significantly influence such large organisations' policies and practices, specifically following Finnish policy aims, because the experts working in organisations like the UN agencies, World Bank, or EU adapt quickly to these organisations' dynamics and mindsets. To maintain Finnish experts who focus on Finnish education aims in development cooperation, it is necessary to maintain close and active networks

between these experts and the Finnish government. For example, In line with this, one of the participants argues:

I would question the assumption that placing individuals in these organisations will create any impact that we want. Because … individuals largely get swallowed up by the priorities of whatever institution they go into. And so I think that way of approaching the issue is flawed unless some clear instruction and guidance are given with tools and information to the experts who are sent to work in the organisations to lobby from the inside, because that's now missing. So if you do, and the French do this very well, they send their people in, and then they give them instructions. We send our people in, and then they're kind of lost. (Interviewee 22)

Based on what has been said thus far, it is evident that the views of the interviewees concerning the role their nationality plays in their influence within international organisations are controversial. Despite some opinions arguing that being a Finnish national already earns space for influence, most experts believe nationality is not hugely relevant when one works inside a large and complex international organisation like the UN agencies or the World Bank. Above all, being a policy entrepreneur successfully influencing large international organisations' decisions is a complex and non-linear activity. To be influential and successfully propel certain policy ideas onto the agenda, professional knowledge of a field may be relevant, but aspects such as one's understanding of the dynamics of such organisations, the ability to develop a good professional network, and possessing the right personal traits are even more important. These combined personal features can become noticeable and earn the policy entrepreneur the trust of its community and an influential voice when negotiating policies and plans.

5.3. Finnish education experts' influence and impact in the countries of intervention

The Finnish education experts participating in our study were also asked about the influence and impact they believe they had in the countries where they worked or were still working. We again identified a variety of perspectives.

Some experts say that because Finland is respected for its education system's success, proven by PISA and other large-scale assessments' results, people in other countries are curious and want to hear what Finns have to say.

…when I go to a ministry here, and they hear I'm Finnish, my counterparts are excited because Finland has such a good education system and such amazing PISA results. So then I have more of a voice because I'm Finnish. And that's basically qualification enough for me to speak… (Interviewee 5)

In addition, most interviewees believe that even if they do not manage to be influential at the policy level because of their junior position, for example, their work has an impact at the local or community level within specific programmes or activities. One of the experts argued:

I think my contributions have been limited in this respect. They've been mainly about teacher training. … Perhaps what I bring to the team is related to aspects of inclusion. I think I have an analytical eye, and I can kind of make sure these aspects are kind of mainstreamed in our different outcome areas. So basically, that's my mandate, and I think, yeah, within the limits of our narrowed programming that's what I've been contributing to. (Interviewee 14)

Nevertheless, all the senior experts argue that like the dynamics within international organisations' headquarters, policy entrepreneurship at the country level is never a straightforward activity. These experts explain that personal skills play a major role in the dynamics of influencing the policymaking processes of the countries where they are working, and these are more important than being an expert in a specific

sector. Some experts posit that policy advocacy takes time and patience, requiring strong diplomatic skills and an ability to recognise when to listen and when to talk, while knowing what to say.

> …very often at these tables, you don't necessarily need education skills, but you need to be, you need to have the negotiation skills, and you need to have the endless patience to drink cups of tea with the people who make the decisions, and just sit there and talk, and not go straight to the point. … I had the patience, and I don't know how many cups of tea I've drunk, honestly [laughs], with their equivalent education sector high-level people, but because of this they started to trust me, and then because of that, I was able to influence the priorities they put in the GPE plan… (Interviewee 19)

Nevertheless, in concurring with studies developed by researchers in critical and postcolonial studies (e.g. Silva and Oliveira, 2021; Sultana, 2019; Menashy, 2018), most of the interviewed experts working in the country offices of international organisations explain that the context is key. More important than Finnish experts offering solutions for local problems, it is fundamental that they support local actors in empowering themselves to create and lead education initiatives. If that is to happen, local voices should be heard and prioritised, the local context's limitations and possibilities should be carefully considered, and the local actors' plans and priorities should be supported rather than replaced by the projects and interests of international organisations or donor countries. On this topic one of our interviewees argues critically:

> My view has been that countries solve their problems themselves. There's none of this saviour mentality. … I don't think it has much impact, this thing of organising internationally, having all kinds of arrangements internationally, solving these problems. Education is a national mandate – every country wants to be in charge of its education system, and it's so fundamental to citizenship, it's fundamental to being whichever country's citizen, so these countries finance the system, even the poor ones. Their donors, the North, contribute and provide funding, but I've always advocated that it has to be a country-specific approach. (Interviewee 8)

Furthermore, the large majority of the experts interviewed also argue that it should be understood that an expert from any country in the Global North deployed to a Global South country needs to be humble and understand that being an education expert in the Finnish education system is not to be an expert in that of any other context. In this respect one of the participants appeals precisely to the need for deployed experts to play the role of learners instead of teachers when arriving at a new context in the Global South under the scope of global education development:

> I really want to point to this sort of humble thinking, of listening, … of the initial phase of just taking it all in and being … basically not an expert at all. Yes, you're being sent as a Finnish expert, but you don't know anything there yet. So this is an opportunity for you to learn. (Interviewee 2)

The diversity of the testimonies of the Finnish education experts participating in this study illustrates the ambiguous and chaotic development cooperation environment in general and the characteristics of these professionals' interactions. The Finnish education experts assert that their activities are (or should be) always intertwined with the activities of other policy actors at the national and local levels of the host countries rather than with actors within international organisations or their own country of origin. Although these experts understand they are influential and impactful, most argue that their influence and impact have little to do with the fact that they are Finnish. Like any other expert entering a new context, they also argue that they must earn others' trust in order to influence policy decisions. Although they seem to consider their role relevant, they believe their work in the Global South countries must be developed collaboratively in partnership with local actors instead of imposing new policy approaches from the outside. These

policy approaches must also be contextualised for the place in which the initiative is taking place.

6. Conclusions

In this article we aimed to shed light on how Finnish education experts placed – or until recently working – in international organisations perceived their influence in both a) these organisations' decision making and b) decision making in the context of the Global South where the development initiatives took place.

In earlier readings of the data, we were able to identify the interviewees as policy entrepreneurs (Kingdon, 2003) with the knowledge and resources to possibly influence the global education agenda through their work in international organisations' headquarters and country offices. The diversity – and even contrast – of perspectives identified in the data demonstrates the high levels of ambiguity and complexity of the ground on which education experts involved in development cooperation move. In both contexts it is key to carefully understand the characteristics and dynamics of a locale if one wants to influence the agenda. This includes understanding the hierarchies, priorities, and interests of the various policy actors, ability to create relevant connections with these actors, and identify the moments when policy advocacy is more likely to be effective. Furthermore, as established by the MSA, becoming a relevant policy entrepreneur and being able to influence others is a highly strategic and non-linear task that takes time, resources, and personal skills. The interviewees highlight that these elements are relevant in both, when working in international organisations' headquarters and when placed in country offices.

Especially at the country level the influencing process is contingent on the strength of an entrepreneur's skills and relations as well as the possibilities and limitations of the context in which the initiative takes place. The education experts - using the MSA terminology, policy entrepreneurs - need to be attentive and identify a) the moment when a policy window is more likely to open and b) the policymakers from which they earned trust and are thus more likely to advance these experts' policy solutions, and which of these policymakers are more likely to be more successful in managing to put these solutions in the policy agenda. This clearly highlights that no change is made by an individual alone, and the ability of entrepreneurs to create strong networks in their professional environment is fundamental (Kingdon, 2003, pp. 180–181).

It is also noteworthy that while the experts' adaptation to their organisations was often mentioned as a natural process, it was rarely acknowledged that the direct relationship between these experts' ability to adapt to the culture and understand the aims of the host organisation is required to gain a voice inside the organisation and to be more likely to influence decision making. This adaptation to the host organisation is somehow portrayed negatively as if implying the loss of the experts' Finnishness per se. Simultaneously coordinating the aims of the international organisation in which these experts work and the Finnish policy's goals for cooperation development in the education sector are understood to be possible but difficult. They are described as barely happening currently. Based on the analysis of the data, we argue that if this integration of national aims into the international agenda is to occur, these national aims and those of international organisations must be sufficiently similar to enable a synergy of agendas (Centeno, 2017). As is described in subsection 5.1, the analysis of the Finnish development policies for development cooperation demonstrates that this criterion seems to be established at the moment. The Finnish agenda for development cooperation is well aligned with the commonly agreed SDGs – and more specifically, SDG 4. To become influential within these organisations, both of the following must occur: the experts must self-adapt to the host organisations' dynamics, and the experts must remain connected to a national agenda. It is therefore necessary to maintain strong networks between these experts and their national governments.

Nevertheless, the analysis presented in this paper demonstrates that

more than advancing the 'Finnish agenda', most of the interviewed experts highlight the importance of developing dynamics of cooperation in which the hierarchy of diplomacy becomes more horizontal or is completely inverted. This means that to be effective in the process of influencing others in the context of the countries where international organisations intervene, it is necessary to change the historical trends of established power relations. Thus, develop new collaborative partnerships led by local actors, including the knowledge, interests, and priorities of the actors of each of these contexts, are key. Influencing should always be not only inclusive of the local actors but to take a format in which it becomes clear that international organisations' agendas fit these contexts' agendas, and not the other way around. The limitations of the data mean that it remains to be assessed if the interviewees shared critical views on the established power relations is indeed realised in practice, and if not, how big is the gap between what is said and what is done – and why this gap even exists.

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