

Why Education Systems Converge: Testing Six Theories of Global Educational Change

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Introduction

Educational change today operates at an unprecedented global scale. National curricula are shaped by international assessments, universities chase global rankings, and policy models rapidly spread across borders. These globalization-fueled patterns raise an important question: what motivates convergence when national contexts, needs and outcomes differ so widely? Six dominant theoretical frameworks in comparative education offer competing answers: Functionalism, Micro-Realism, Historical Institutionalism, Macro-Realism, World Culture Theory and Post/Decolonial approaches. These theories offer unique explanations for global education change but differ in their assumptions about what drives this change.

This paper evaluates theories by examining their explanatory strengths and limitations, with a particular focus on the theory-evidence link, which helps assess how each theory aligns with observed patterns of educational change. Through a systematic tournament between the leading theories, this paper argues that World Culture Theory provides the most convincing account of why countries adopt global scripts even when local effectiveness remains uncertain.

Tournament of the Theories

To structure this comparative evaluation, this paper draws on a conceptual framework from Rappleye (2025, lecture) which organizes the six leading theories along two dimensions: scale and orientation, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 – Framework of Comparative Education Theories by Scale and Orientation

	Consensus	Conflict	Interpretation
Macro	(5) World Culture Theory	(4) Macro-Realism	(6/7) Post/Decolonial (Epistemological/Ontological)
Micro	(1) Functionalism	(2) Micro-Realism	(3) Historical Institutionalism

Adapted from Rappleye (2025, lecture)

Micro-level theories focus on domestic actors and national contexts, whereas macro-level theories focus on educational change within global systems. Along the orientation dimension, consensus theories emphasize shared interests and voluntary coordination, while conflict-oriented theories focus on power asymmetries and domination. Interpretivist theories challenge both consensus and conflict theories by rejecting the assumption that interests or power alone drive educational change. This serves as the basis for the first round of the tournament, in which micro- and macro-level counterparts within each orientation will compete.

Round 1 – Comparing Micro- and Macro-Level Explanations

Match 1 – Functionalism vs World Culture Theory

Both theories assume that educational change represents a rational response to systemic needs. Functionalism, as outlined by Feinberg and Soltis (2009), views schools as social institutions that serve the needs of society to create an effective and stable society. This is done through transmission of shared values and allocating people to roles. In a functionalist society, schools are responsible for producing the human capital needed by the local economy and reforms emerge when skill mismatches threaten the stability of society.

World Culture Theory (WCT) operates within a neo-institutionalist logic that attributes global educational convergence to shared cultural scripts that define the ideal ‘modern’ state. Ramirez (2012) argues that schooling functions primarily as a mechanism for legitimacy by adopting standardized blueprints and emphasizing globally valued domains such as STEM education, with the intent of signaling their membership in a community of rational and modern nations. This pursuit of legitimacy results in systems increasingly looking alike to satisfy global models of progress, a phenomenon known as institutional isomorphism.

Empirical evidence from Hong Kong's higher education sector favors WCT. If educational change was influenced by local societal needs, then the Research Grants Council (RGC) would prioritize funding research that addresses major problems affecting Hong Kong (HK), such as rising wealth inequality (Oxfam Hong Kong, 2024), a housing crisis (Wong, 2022) and an ageing population (Ho, 2022). Instead, the RGC explicitly prioritizes "international excellence," a criterion that is stated in the University Grants Committee's Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) 2020 Guidance Notes, which requires research to be evaluated against "international benchmarks" (University Grants Committee, 2018, p.3). As a result, scholars conducting locally grounded research that help create a more effective and stable HK are disadvantaged compared to scholars producing "international[ly] excellent" work that gets published in Q1 Scientific Research Journals (SJRs), which tend to receive more visibility from other top scholars and hence higher citation counts (Falagas et al., 2008), resulting in the Q1 SJR scholars being viewed as more successful within RGC evaluation frameworks. Alatas (2003) describes this dynamic as "academic dependency," where research agendas and standards of excellence in non-Western countries are shaped by dominant Western views rather than by local context.

Given this, Functionalism loses the match, not because it's incorrect but because its explanatory scope is too narrow. It can explain reform driven by local societal needs, but struggles in the modern 'global era,' where nations are constantly compared to one another and evaluated through shared international standards. In such a context, countries increasingly borrow policies from globally recognized leaders, even when they fail to serve local needs. WCT better captures this as it accounts for policy borrowing driven by desire for legitimacy within the "world polity" (Ramirez, 2012).

Match 2 – Micro-Realism vs Macro-Realism

Both theories emphasize inequality rather than consensus. However, they differ in where they locate that power. Micro-realism, rooted in conflict theory (Feinberg & Soltis, 2009), explains educational change primarily through domestic class struggle. From this perspective, education systems reproduce existing social hierarchies by elevating the interests of dominant groups to the level of universal norms, which are then used to evaluate others. By presenting the interests of the dominant class as serving the common good (referred to as ‘hegemony’), inequality is reproduced rather than challenged.

Macro-Realism challenges the local focus of Micro-Realism as insufficient in a globalized world. Drawing on world-systems analysis, Arnove (2009) argues that the appropriate unit of analysis is the world-system itself, not individual nation-states. Instead, educational change in peripheral and semi-peripheral countries must be analyzed with reference to power relations between them and core states, including the influence of international organizations such as the World Bank and OECD. This is further reinforced by Steiner-Khamisi’s (2012) critique of national policy agendas, showing that they cannot be understood as self-contained in an era of transnational policy flows.

The Cambodia PISA-D case provides a clear empirical test for these competing explanations. If Micro-Realism were sufficient, participation in PISA-D would reflect the interests of Cambodian elites. Instead, the evidence shows the opposite. Senior education officials, including the Minister of Education, actively resisted participation, arguing that PISA-D distracted from national priorities. Given this resistance, the OECD framed non-participation to be a threat to Cambodia, as it would not only affect future aid but provide other countries with a ‘first-mover’ advantage (Auld et al., 2018). Through threatening Cambodia’s legitimacy on the global stage, the

OECD successfully managed to secure their participation in the PISA-D pilot and later the main PISA assessment (Auld et al., 2018).

Given this evidence, Micro-Realism loses this match. It successfully highlights inequality within education systems but lacks the scale to explain why states adopt reforms that their own leaders oppose. Macro-Realism offers a stronger explanation by showing how power operates beyond the nation state, and specifically how the core dominates the periphery.

Match 3 – Historical Institutionalism vs Post/Decolonial

Historical Institutionalism (HI) explains educational change by emphasizing how past choices shapes the present. It acknowledges that education systems are not blank slates and operate through historically embedded “rules of the game” (Feinberg & Soltis, 2009, p.91) that determine how global scripts are adapted across differing national contexts. It demonstrates why a ‘one-size-fits-all’ policy does not produce identical outcomes across countries. Instead, they get filtered through existing traditions and unique historical contexts that produce divergence from an educational change lens.

Post/Decolonial operates at a deeper level. Where HI shows that a ‘one-size-fits-all’ policy does not produce uniform results in different countries, post/decolonial questions (i) why a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach is even being used for differing countries in the first place? and (ii) whose knowledge and whose vision of humanity do these scripts carry? Takayama (2014) argues that WCT itself must be “provincialized,” exposing its supposed neutral global scripts as historically specific Western cultural artifacts that have been projected onto the rest of the world. More fundamentally, Komatsu et al. (2021) show that global educational scripts import specific ontological assumptions about what a human being is: an autonomous individual, separate from community and environment, whose purpose is skill acquisition for maximizing economic

productivity. This goes deeper than questioning whose knowledge counts (epistemological) by questioning what kind of human being schools are producing (ontological).

The empirical evidence goes against HI as it can only analyze what is explicit and institutional, while failing to account for resistance against educational change. HI assumes that divergence exists because the same actors are operating within different institutions and hence with different constraints. However, evidence from the Japanese curriculum reveals otherwise. When a teacher tells a child, “Poor Mister Carrot! You ate Mr. Hamburger, Mr. Rice, and Mr. Orange, but you haven’t eaten any of Mr. Carrot. Don’t you think he feels lonely (*sabishii*)?” (Hayashi et al., 2009, p.32), one might wonder why they are attributing human emotions to a vegetable. HI cannot explain this interaction as it reduces school lunch to a purely nutritional function, interpreting the teacher’s remark as a strategy to encourage eating or avoid waste. Post/Decolonial shows that she is enacting a different understanding of ontology and how beings relate. The teacher’s claim about the carrot being lonely relies on a shared ontology where “items of food have feelings” and children naturally “empathize with the neglected, sad carrot” (Hayashi et al., 2009, p.38). In this context, loneliness is not a psychological problem to be fixed but a “highly valued, cultivated and savored” state that is essential for “social connection” (Hayashi et al., 2009, p.39). This strategy works because Japanese children live in a society where “*sabishii*, *amae*, and *omoiyari* (loneliness, dependence, and empathy) form a triad of emotional exchange” (Hayashi et al., 2009, p.35) that binds all beings together, even carrots.

Therefore, HI loses this match. While HI usefully maps how local “rules of the game” create friction for global policies, its explanatory scope is limited. It interprets the gap between global policy and local practice, which Ramirez (2012) terms as “loose coupling” and what Arnove (2009) describes as “decoupling,” as a failure of implementation caused by pre-existing

institutional rules and national contexts that clash with the imported policies, thus hindering the intended outcomes. Where HI identifies this gap, Post/Decolonial explains this clash as a rejection of the West's "culturally specific belief in ontological individualism" (Komatsu et al., 2021, p. 23). As Rappleye et al. (2024) demonstrate in their analysis of *Shokuiku* (food education), Japan's refusal to adopt efficient Western-style cafeteria is not due to local "rules of the game," but rather a commitment to "interdependence," where lunch is maintained as a communal activity of serving and being served as opposed to individual consumption. Post/Decolonial sees these 'implementation failures' as an ontological war, in which local realities are actively resisting erasure by global scripts.

Summary of Round 1

All three micro-level theories were defeated. This outcome reflects the realities of a globalized and interdependent world, where domestically focused explanations struggle to explain "educational change in a global era." However, these theories were not eliminated, but relegated to the domestic league, where they remain valuable for explaining how global policies are interpreted and adapted within national contexts.

Round 2 – The Semi-Final

In this round, WCT and Macro-Realism face off as rival explanations for global educational convergence. The winner of this match will advance to the final, where it confronts Post/Decolonial, which questions the epistemic and ontological assumptions shared by both semi-finalists, asking why Western models and definitions of the human are being used in the first place.

Match 4 – World Culture Theory vs Macro-Realism

Macro-Realism argues that peripheral nations adopt policies primarily through coercion from powerful core nations. WCT, by contrast, argues that nations voluntarily adopt global policy scripts for legitimacy within the world polity, regardless of their feasibility.

Inclusive education in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) provides a decisive test between these theories. If Macro-Realism were sufficient, resource-constrained states would be expected to resist adopting costly Western models that are economically unsustainable. Yet, the evidence shows widespread over-adoption of the global script.

A World Bank report by Wodon et al. (2018) revealed that 38 SSA countries have ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and that “all countries but three either state or guarantee their Constitution to the right to primary education for all children, including those with disabilities” (Wodon et al., 2018, p.4). These formal commitments closely mirror those of the core nations, despite a significant difference in availability of resources.

However, implementation remained minimal after a decade. At the time of the report, only three SSA countries had an established policy on inclusive education, while six had only drafted one. Fewer than 9% of teachers had received training in inclusive education, and diagnostic hearing and vision tests were almost entirely absent in schools. The attainment gap between disabled and non-disabled students widened rather than narrowed.

Macro-Realism can describe the outcome of persistent inequality despite policy adoption but falls short in explaining the mechanism behind it. It begs the question of why would resource-constrained nations voluntarily establish inclusive education as a constitutional right when they lack the means for successfully implementation? WCT helps answer this question. In a global society where 177 countries have ratified international disability rights conventions (Wodon et al., 2018), non-adoption may threaten a nation’s legitimacy as a modern member of the world polity. This desire for legitimacy leads to a decoupling between policy and implementation. It is not a failure of WCT but is exactly the outcome that is predicted by Ramirez (2012). Hence, WCT advances to the final.

Round 3 – The Final

Match 5 – World Culture Theory vs Post/Decolonial

Post/Decolonial challenges the premise of the tournament itself, which evaluates theories by their ability to explain why policy convergence is a recurring feature of educational change, even when resisted and deemed locally ineffective or unviable. It argues that global education policies are not neutral best practices but Western cultural artifacts that displace local ontologies and generate resistance. WCT, however, shows that such resistance does not prevent diffusion because adoption is driven by the desire for legitimacy, and nations continue to align with global scripts even when they conflict with local realities.

The case of Learner-Centered Education (LCE) provides evidence for this claim. As Brinkmann (2015) reveals, the Indian government has aggressively promoted Western-style LCE as the “preferred model” for reform, a commitment explicitly highlighted in the Twelfth Five Year Plan (2012-2017) (Planning Commission, 2013).

However, this Western script clashes with the local ontology. Brinkmann’s (2015) study shows that Indian teachers hold deep-seated cultural beliefs in hierarchy and knowledge transmission (the ‘Guru’ tradition) that are “antithetical to [the Western values of] learner-centered pedagogy” (Brinkmann, 2015, p. 342). For instance, 47% of teachers believed that maintaining “distance” and instilling “fear” was necessary to enforce a rigid hierarchical boundary, directly contradicting the Western script of the “friendly facilitator.”

Despite this clear ontological incompatibility, India continues to mandate LCE policies to signal its modernity. The result of this continued adoption is a reality where teachers adopt the vocabulary of the global script to satisfy international organizations, while the reality remains decoupled. The global script (WCT) wins not because it works, but because it successfully dictates

the rules of legitimacy, forcing a nation with deep indigenous traditions to measure itself by a decontextualized global standard it cannot meaningfully meet.

WCT wins the tournament as it can explain why nations like India and Hong Kong voluntarily adopt policies that contradict their own ontologies. It proves that a nation's need for global legitimacy is powerful enough to drive policy adoption despite clashing ontologies. Post/Decolonial offers a vital critique, correctly identifying the deep ontological beliefs as the cause behind the decoupling that WCT identifies.

Conclusion

In conclusion, WCT provides the most convincing explanation for contemporary patterns of global educational change. Whether the context is research funding in HK's higher education sector, inclusive education adoption in SSA or LCE in India, WCT consistently explains why nations continue to adopt global scripts even when they are locally ineffective, economically unviable or ontologically incompatible. It accounts for the desire for legitimacy that nations require to be viewed as a modern state within the world polity and the persistent decoupling that occurs between policy and practice.

However, this tournament has shown that Post/Decolonial offers an essential critique that helps complete WCT instead of challenging it. While WCT can explain why policy adoption occurs, Post/Decolonial attributes the failure of policy implementation to the hidden Western ontological assumptions present in the global scripts being adopted, which marginalize alternative ways of being, learning and relating. When these Western ontological assumptions meet local ontologies, there is a clash, which helps explain why decoupling occurs in WCT. Taken together, WCT and Post/Decolonial offer the most complete explanation of the convergence present in contemporary global educational change.

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