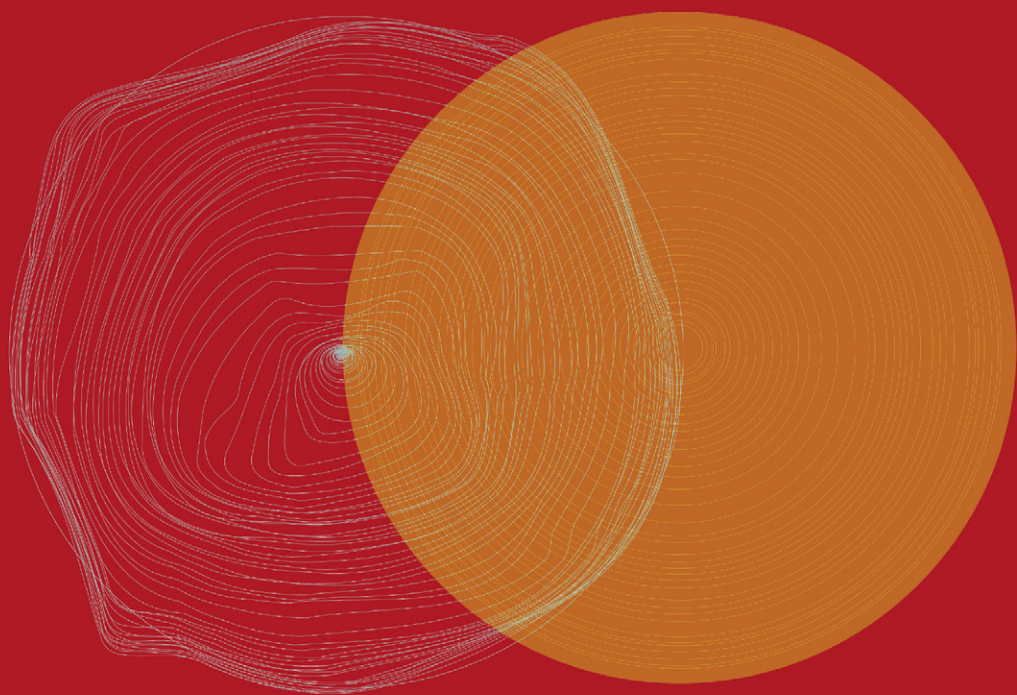


# EDUCATIONAL STANDARDISATION IN A COMPLEX WORLD



EDITED BY

HANNE RIESE

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

# Table of Contents

About the Editors	vii
About the Contributors	ix

## Part 1: Framing

<b>Chapter 1 Introduction: How to Frame Standards and Standardisation in Education</b>	3
<i>Hanne Riese, Gunn Elisabeth Soreide and Line T. Hilt</i>	
<b>Chapter 2 Waves of Standardisation</b>	25
<i>Paolo Landri</i>	
<b>Chapter 3 Ambiguities of Standardisation in Education</b>	43
<i>Palle Rasmussen</i>	

## Part 2: Findings

<b>Chapter 4 Global Agenda on Knowledge and Governance and Language Literacy Practices in Secondary Education in Greece</b>	63
<i>Anna Tsatsaroni and Sofia Koutsiouri</i>	
<b>Chapter 5 Terms of Talent in an Upper Secondary Danish School Context: Local Reactions to Standardisation of Educational Talent</b>	85
<i>Anette Rasmussen</i>	
<b>Chapter 6 Narrative Control and Standards for Pupil Identity in the Norwegian LK-20 Educational Reform</b>	105
<i>Gunn Elisabeth Soreide</i>	

<b>Chapter 7 Understanding the Effects of the Standardisation of Social Competences in the Italian Educational System: Teachers' Conceptions in a Context of Normative Indeterminacy</b>	125
<i>Alice Spada</i>	

<b>Chapter 8 Mastering Life through Skills: Risk Prevention through 'Standards of the Self' in Health and Life-Skills Education</b>	143
<i>Line T. Hilt and Hanne Riese</i>	

<b>Chapter 9 Performance Standards in Assessment and Possible Alternatives</b>	163
<i>Astrid Tolo</i>	

### Part 3: Futures

<b>Chapter 10 Re-Imagining Educational Standards</b>	181
<i>Aline Nardo</i>	

<b>Chapter 11 How Not to Be Governed by Social and Emotional Standards</b>	197
<i>Line T. Hilt</i>	

<b>Chapter 12 Redesigning Standardised Education in the Totally Pedagogised Society</b>	217
<i>Parlo Singh and Stephen Heimans</i>	

Index	233
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# **Part 1**

## **Framing**

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## Chapter 1

# Introduction: How to Frame Standards and Standardisation in Education

*Hanne Riese, Gunn Elisabeth Søreide and Line T. Hilt*

### Abstract

This introductory chapter introduces standards and standardisation as concepts of outmost relevance to current educational practice and policy across the world, and frames them historically, empirically, as well as theoretically. Furthermore, it gives an overview of how the book is structured and how it can be seen to contribute to the wider field of research in education. The chapter starts by introducing the concepts before it provides the reader with a background description of the broad discursive landscape of policy developments, as painted by educational policy research. Subsequently it describes how standards and standardisation have been theorised within educational research, and concludes with a presentation of the different contributions.

*Keywords:* History of standards; conceptualising standards and standardisation; defining standards and standardisation; education policy; theorising standards in education; standards and risks

In the modern world, teaching and learning have taken place in special buildings, grouping student according to age-specific requirements, teaching them knowledge and competences according to the curriculum. All of which can be seen as standards, understood as rules of action and communication. Historically, the empirical importance and relevance of standards for education is thus evident.

In an overarching perspective, standards could be described as cultural forms or ideas with a certain public recognition that apply in a given space at a particular point of time, allowing for comparison and communication. Cultural ideas, as found in classifications, standards or norms, have value because of their sorting, supporting or interpretative function. They are ‘recipes for reality’ (Busch, 2011) important to coordinating the activity of any system or organisation. Thus, as any

organisation can be seen to rest on such ‘recipes for reality’, they are inevitably being produced, reproduced and changed in accordance with circulating knowledge and expertise (Landri, this volume). As cultural ideas work within sets of other ideas, the degree to which rules of action and communication, (norms, classifications and ‘recipes’) are recognised as standards, can differ. Some standards are more stable and long lasting (e.g. ordering of teaching according to age, discipline, hours) than others (e.g. arrangements regarding access to education by gender) and over time, some standards may also become common sense and thereby invisible (Lampland & Star, 2009). Standards however tend to be challenged when conditions and contexts temporally or spatially change, triggering negotiations for new standards to be agreed upon.

The history of standards as allowing for a reduction of social complexity in the educational system (See, e.g. Luhmann, 2006) and a phenomenon securing relevance of education to society, is long. In the nascent stage, schooling as we know it was conceived through standards regarding grouping, buildings and curricula. In the early twentieth century, standards were given an explicit role in education policy when concern for social efficiency gave birth to ideas about standards-based reforms in education (Waldow, 2015). Whilst in recent decades, the global economic development has instigated the spreading of standards to mobilise schooling for national competitiveness (Rizvi & Lingard, 2009). In this newer context, standard-based reforms have since the 1980s been developed and effected in educational systems world-wide, focusing on what students should be able to know, understand and do (Lewis, Savage, & Holloway, 2020). A central idea of these reforms is to align curriculum design, assessment and professional development with performance standards, thus making standards the very *nave* of educational governance. This so-called governing rationality of standards (Lewis, Savage, & Holloway, 2020) suggests that standards may be regarded as playing a key role in policy. In Landri’s words, the story is one of recurring waves of standards reflecting the current networks of actors, knowledges and discourse on how to govern education. Reduction of complexity is key to management as actors (or experts) and knowledges interact to produce and legitimate policy rationalities relevant to particular times in space (Landri, this volume; Lewis et al., 2020; Popkewitz, 2004). It can thus be argued that standards continually gain stronger attention, politically, scientifically as well as educationally, as they become means of dealing with societal risk and complexity.

However, classifications such as standards are fraught with uncertainty (Scott, 1998). They guide our attention so that something is noticed at the cost of that which is consequently not enlightened, and in this respect, they are highly ambiguous (Bowker & Star, 1999). Furthermore, standards allow for the disciplining practice of auditing, and consequently for ‘knowledge about [its] achievements to become[s] constitutive of [its] aims and objectives’ (Strathern, 2005, p. 465). As a possible implication, standards in their function as governing technologies, not only yield information on outputs or results but also guide the way in which we conceive of education (Gorur, 2016). The consequences of this development have been claimed to set off an educational crisis more severe than the problems it set out to solve (Taubman, 2009). This has again propelled

discussions and concerns on the role and impact of standards in education. These concerns can be traced across the chapters in this book. They are multifaceted and include problems such as the privilege of market-oriented values in education (Rasmussen, Hilt and Riese, Hilt), reduction of complexity and promotion of conformity (Søreide, Nardo), reproduction of social inequality (Rasmussen, Spada), as well as exclusive future orientedness that risks narrowing down the aim of education (Nardo).

In the following, standards, as a concern to educational policy as well as research, will firstly be framed within what can be described as the broad discursive landscape of policy developments as painted by educational policy research. The chapter then turns to theorising of standards and standardisation within educational research. It concludes with a presentation of the contributions of this particular volume to the field of standards in education.

## **Standards and the Landscape of Educational Policy Developments**

As a tool supporting a shift of educational discourse from a matter of purely nation state control to a matter highly influenced by global and inter-national actors, standards are the currency of contemporary negotiations around education. They are central to educational policy in the knowledge society and relevant to discussions on all levels of the educational system. They address concerns for quality, inclusion and professional development but are at the same time the cause of concern and debate regarding the fate of education.

### ***The Influence of Neoliberal Rationalities***

Standards are important components of what has been conceptualised as neo-liberal governance. The academic use of the term neoliberalism has become increasingly common during the 2000s and point to a range of ongoing societal, political and economic changes such as increased emphasis on individual choice and responsibility and financial deregulation and marketisation of public services, starting in the second half of the last century (Brady, 2014). Consequently, current discussions of standards and standardisation in education are often set against practices, ideas, structures or technologies related to the way neoliberalism has found its way into global, national and local educational policy and practice.

According to Ball (2012), neo-liberalism has a two-fold meaning, referring both to the governing of the population through the production of self-managing selves (The Foucauldian term of ‘conduct upon conduct’), as well as the ‘economisation’ of other social domains in order to create new opportunities for profit. Standard-based education is imbued in both of these understandings, as education increasingly is measured according to economic standards and students are governed through performance standards set out to ensure economic utility, employability or college readiness (Apple, 2019; Pickup, 2020). In this perspective, neoliberal rationality has materialised in a

variety of ways within the educational sector, with the introduction of audit and accountability systems, standards- and outcomes-based education, testing and comparison of student achievements, as well as marketisation and economisation of education and knowledge as some of the most prevalent.

Increased policy borrowing and cooperation across national states, accompanied by the workings of supra-national organisations such as the OECD PISA test and a growing global educational industry, facilitate the ‘traveling’ of ideas to national educational policies and governing across the globe (Steiner-Khamsi, 2014, 2016). Consequently, it is currently easy to identify traces of neoliberal educational rationalities in educational policy and practice in a range of national educational systems. This could lead to the assumption that national educational systems are becoming both increasingly ‘neoliberal’ and similar in their form and shape.

To standardise can be defined as ‘to make one thing the same as others of that type, or to compare one thing to something accepted as a model’ (Cambridge dictionary). Accordingly, it is not surprising that the global ‘traveling’ of educational practices, ideas, structures and technologies set in motion by the neoliberal rationality often are interpreted as not only producing new educational standards but also resulting in increased standardisation of education. In this perspective, standardisation in education has been interpreted as homogenisation, in which the flavours of local educational systems are evaporating in the encounter with the global forces of neoliberalism (Hilt & Riese, 2021).

Also, in this book educational standards and standardisation is discussed in relation to the forces of neoliberal rationality. Although not always explicitly, the majority of the book’s contributions take practices, ideas, structures or technologies that can be traced back to a neoliberal rationality as a point of departure, context or backdrop when they discuss educational standards and standardisation. However, the different contributions show that these ideas and practices are set in motion in ambiguous and idiosyncratic ways, thus challenging the notion of increased homogenisation of education resulting from standards and standardisation.

Empirical research concerned with how educational policy ideas, conceptions and technologies travel and encounter national educational policy has also underscored that it is highly uncertain whether or in what ways ‘...national educational systems are converging towards a singular international model of education’ (Steiner-Khamsi, 2016, p. 163) and are standardised and homogenised across space (Lewis et al., 2019). As the traveling of educational policy also includes reception into the existing context, local and national policymakers tend to select policy ideas, conceptions and technologies that are relevant to their domestic policy agendas and concerns (Steiner-Khamsi, 2014). Global educational policy ideas, conceptions and technologies are consequently adjusted to and merged with already existing contextual features (Hilt, Riese, & Søreide, 2019; Lewis et al., 2019; Steiner-Khamsi, 2014).

Similar points are made by Brady (2014) when it comes to neoliberal rationalities and governing technologies as she underscores that ‘...neoliberal rationalities vary across national contexts because they emerge from critiques of very

different economic-institutional-discursive forms of social government' (Brady, 2014, p. 24). Following this, Brady therefore urges researchers to be careful to interpret identifiable elements of neoliberal rationalities in policies or structures as an indication that neoliberal power structures are dominant, or that there are no alternative governing rationalities present. Potential overinterpretations of the effects and significance of neoliberal rationalities and technologies not only obscure the complex power relations at work but also possibilities of resistance, negotiations and viable alternatives (Brady, 2014, p. 24).

Neither neoliberalism, nor standardisation looks the same or acts in the same way in all national and local contexts. Although this book sketches out some possible dangers of educational standards and standardisation (often originating in neoliberal rationalities), an equally important element of this volume is thus to illuminate how neoliberal rationalities and seemingly global educational standards are changed, challenged, and negotiated when encountering national and local educational contexts carrying alternative rationalities and standards.

### ***Numbers, Comparisons and Accountability***

The importance of standards in education increases with the growth in numbers (Landri, 2018; Taubman, 2009). Numbers allow 'information shortcuts' with particular appeal to policy as they simplify and allow commensurability as well as appear neutral and objective (Broome & Quirk, 2015). The development from the 1980s and onwards, marked by growing importance on information to support output-based governing, made policy in increasing demand for, as well as dependence upon, data (Ozga, 2009). This movement, discussed as a transformation of governing to governance (Ozga, 2009; Ozga, Grek, & Lawn, 2009), spurred what has been described as a growth of 'new public policy instruments', appearing as less rigid, based on coordination rather than regulation, and sensitive to institutionalised demand for information and communication (Lascoumes & Le Gales, 2007). Thus, a set of factors, increasing information through numbers, comparison through instruments such as standards, and altered manners of governing, are important in a changing educational landscape in the late 1990s and beginning of the new millennium.

In the first chapter of this book, Landri states that the rise in options for processing numbers allowed by the shift to global comparativism is a normative shift. It implies a change in how comparison is achieved in education, from systems to individual levels. In the eloquent paper titled 'Governing Knowledge: research steering and research quality', Jenny Ozga (2008) shows how information, based on performance data collected from actors at the level of schools and individuals, changes the nature of both knowledge and governing in a way that makes the two interdependent: The new form of knowledge (information) allows governing without government through comparison of performance. The interpretation and management of the new knowledge, in turn mobilises a range of new actors (experts) and policy instruments (such as standards), implying the governing of knowledge.

The mobilisation of new actors or experts in educational policymaking includes international organisations (IOs) as well as corporate actors. Corporate actors' increasing influence reflects the neo-liberal rationality and the consequent marketisation and economisation of education. [Fontdevila, Verger, and Avelar \(2021\)](#) show how actors operating for-profit or with ties to for-profit organisations, such as businesses, as well as think tanks and philanthropic organisations, impact educational provision as well as policymaking. Through various strategies such actors are shown to have material as well as ideational influence, and consequently blur the boundaries between public and private spheres as well as between research and advocacy. An example of the influence of corporate actors is found in the current volume's chapters on social and emotional skills, picturing the role of the twenty-first-century skills movement in legitimating educational policy initiatives.

Equally important, as reflected in most of the chapters of the book, is the role of the IOs in understanding standards in education. The historical growth of IOs is underpinned by the growth of cross-national comparison ([Martens, 2007](#); [Ydesen & Andreasen, 2020](#)). Their influence as knowledge brokers and mediators is demonstrated to be crucial to the rise of what is termed transnational governance in education ([Grek, 2020](#)). By their promotion of standards through large-scale assessments, IOs issue strong influence on all levels of the educational system, albeit the consequences of these instruments are often hard to oversee as well as to critique ([Verger, Fontdevila, & Parcerisa, 2019](#)).

The relationship between IOs and policy instruments based on numbers is an important aspect of the study of standards and standardisation. This relationship has been claimed to constitute what is called an 'audit culture' ([Strathern, 2000](#)), a concept describing how principles and techniques from financial accounting move into measuring performance in contemporary governing ([Shore & Wright, 2015](#)). By expecting individuals and organisations alike to monitor and provide knowledge of self in order to improve, audit-culture institutionalises the need to get better. Simultaneously a concern for the failing to do so is installed, and consequently the future is conceived as fragile ([Strathern, 2005](#)). This reasoning supports the claim that governing operates through regimes of performativity, by the means of measurement and comparison ([Ball, 1998](#)). Responsibility is consequently installed at the level of individuals and organisations through the promotion of set standards of achievement. Several of the contributions to this volume illuminate how policy instantiate standards at the level of individuals and discuss possible consequences, as well as different possible trajectories when such standards meet educational practice.

### ***Simplification, De-professionalisation, Performativity***

Accountability measures, quantification of performance and standards promoting economic utility are central tenets of what scholars have called 'new professionalism' – a concept addressing the consequences of standard based education on professional work. According to [Davies \(2003\)](#), for instance, 'new managerialism' is characterised by 'the removal of the locus of power from the