9 Conclusion

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Introduction

The preceding chapters analyse the politics of quality in education in Brazil, China, and Russia. It has become clear that our premise that quality is the most important framing factor in education is correct. In initiating this research project, we acknowledged the claims previous studies have made about this issue. The shared mind-sets of international organisations' personnel and schoolteachers, who are almost obsessed with quality assurance and evaluation (QAE) whether they view it positively or negatively, confirm the earlier hypothesis. We take this a step further, arguing that it is more accurate to suggest that it is QAE itself, rather than quality, which has become the central framing factor of education policy.

In Chapter 3 we took issue with the historical development of this change. Although different paths to the use of QAE in education are taken, all involve cooperation with international organisations and find it possible to use QAE as an ostensible solution to various problems. In addition to the international organisations' influences, as we pointed out in Chapter 4, to varying degrees, there are also transnational influences via expert networks. Although these three countries have built up their QAE capacity, they have created more room for experts, who are more transnationally oriented in their work. In Chapter 5, we discussed the potential tensions between experts and politicians arising from their different operational logics.

Our research touched on QAE procedures and their concrete work in the socio-political and historical context. As Chapter 2 discussed, in attempting to conduct our research systematically, we glimpsed the everyday reality around the questions of quality in education. As the empirical work progressed, we were able to identify how all the flows of QAE data were described as involving friction at every stage: production, availability, and use (Chapter 6). Moreover, the closer we got to the local level in Chapter 7, the more complex it became in relation to the visions of the transnational QAE agenda Chapter 1 described. Although the frictions of data produced something new (Chapter 6), it became clear that the schools which opposed change found themselves in the most difficult position (Chapter 7). To come full circle, interestingly, future aspirations

of QAE in education are strongly linked to the past (Chapter 8), which begs the question of what this study can teach us.

The epistemological premise of this book is the idea of complexity and contingency. During the many analysis tracks described in Chapter 2, our aim was always to try to understand and comprehensively compare the dynamics of the politics of quality in education in Brazil, China, and Russia. Indeed, there is an internal paradox in our analysis, akin to that of comparative education as a field of enquiry. On one hand, throughout our analysis, we can observe the totality of the QAE agenda, and, if we think sufficiently abstractly, we can see and construct similarities in it across different contexts. On the other, we witness a range and plurality of solutions and use of room for action at different levels, especially at the local. Understanding this comparative paradox has been the goal of our analysis of these dynamics.

In Chapter 1, we questioned the idea of transfer. Our comparative paradox sheds light on identifying the inherent problems of the idea of transfer, even asking, "Should we look for differences or similarities?" We can say there is both a clear policy transfer in the transnational QAE agenda and that there is not. They exist at the same time, like Schrödinger's cat, in a box with a potentially deadly trap, and the outcome is left to probability. However, if we think of causality more in the sense of complexity theories, the conclusion that both ideas co-exist becomes more reasonable. As we argued in Chapter 1, it can be deduced that causality is always a question of probability. The existence of the transnational QAE agenda increases the probability that QAE governance tools will be implemented, yet local conditions create probabilities (path dependencies) which steer events in different directions. This chaotic arrangement creates the conditions for various dynamics.

Three dynamics

We argue that three dynamics can be discerned in Brazil, China, and Russia:

- Quality assurance and evaluation (QAE) rather than quality itself has become the objective of education policy. While quality of education remains undefined and contested, QAE becomes the concrete, defined, must-do in education and remains uncontested. This is constituted in a dynamic of "shared and self-reinforcing goal-setting".
- The QAE toolbox does not produce quality as such but rather works as a means of controlling the provision of education. From the state's geopolitical role in the global field to the local understandings of governance, QAE is an attempt to tease out desired aspects from the education system which are not always connected with education. Regardless of this power-wielding aspect, implementation itself is multifaceted and frequently transnational. We call this dynamic "authorising but diverted governance".
- In the third dynamic, we find that QAE both destabilises and reorganises actor roles. What is interesting here is that state actors, for example, can

easily use quality to establish their position, but then find that opening the QAE toolbox can lead to the destabilisation of the *status quo* in the newly available space for politicking. We call this "destabilising and reorganised role-setting".

Table 9.1 summarises these dynamics, which are discussed in more detail in the following sub-sections, with some references to our research published elsewhere. Each dynamic reflects the dimensions of CADEP (Chapters 1 and 2) and at the same time attempts to illustrate the moving nature of politics. The third dimension of politicking is the defining term for the other two dimensions, as it describes the movement which occurs in the room for action (self-reinforcing, authorising, destabilising) and is symmetrically ("and") or asymmetrically ("but") related to the other attributes. The political situation describes the polity's construction (shared, diverted, reorganised). The political possibilities describe what the target of action is or what is considered the addressed problem or solution (goal-setting, governance, role-setting) (see Simola et al. 2017). We examine each of these dynamics in the following sub-sections.

Self-reinforcing and shared goal-setting: QAE not quality

We have already indicated that QAE is on the agenda of international organisations, usually emphasising the connection between education and economic growth, and the need for QAE procedures in education to make successful policy to reach their education aims (e.g., Chapter 1). In Chapter 1, we questioned this claim, especially the potential for clear top-down rational decision-making based on data. Regardless of this critique, we have found that QAE functions as a governance tool which creates a self-reinforcing dynamic, in which the need for quality and the need for QAE converge and problems and solutions are mingled.

The QAE agenda is *shared* and embedded in webs of actors. In Chapter 4, we argued that the role of international organisations in policy discussions and decisions is clearly variable between our case countries and across time. Contrary to a straightforward policy-transfer notion, our findings show that similarities between local authorities' and international organisations' advice and the problematisation of QAE and the design of QAE tools at national levels do not necessarily prove a cause-and-effect relationship. Any conclusions on

Table 9.1 Dynamics in the politics of quality in Brazil, China, and Russia

Politicking: How is the room for action used?	*The political situation: What is structurally possible for the constellation of actors?*	*Political possibilities: What is considered possible?*
Self-reinforcing	and shared	goal-setting
Authorising	but diverted	governance
Destabilising	and reorganised	role-setting

this question are complicated by the differing views of key actors on "who influenced whom and by how much". However, it is still correct and relevant to speak of a transnational QAE agenda as a network, embodying complex and changing relationships between various actors.

When applied to the general education politics of the three countries, the picture becomes more nuanced. Based on document analysis of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank, we have established that these organisations give Brazil, China, and Russia the same advice, suggesting they take QAE as a guide for policymaking, with the occasional addition that teachers' incentives should be connected to performance (Takala et al. 2018). This agenda has been adopted relatively well in all three countries but always with national emphases. Although it yearns for some elements of Soviet pedagogy (Chapter 8), the Russian national education agenda has changed its justification for QAE from the immediately post-Soviet aims of democratisation and school autonomy to the securing of national economic growth and global competitiveness (Gurova, Piattoeva, & Takala 2015). The Chinese quality education reform has followed the transnational agenda, based on the idea that testing and evaluation are key to the achievement of quality, and international large-scale assessments are viewed positively (Suominen et al. 2017; Chapter 4). The Brazilian political and academic elites have been connected to international trends in times of political and economic stability and instability; QAE policies have mirrored global tendencies (Kauko et al. 2016). However, Brazilian QAE discourse is coloured by social terminology such as "social quality" (Centeno, Kauko, & Candido 2017). Interestingly, in Chapter 8, we have been able to indicate that these aspirations are also projected into the future, tightly connected with QAE, which promises longevity for the shared agenda. We can at least conclude that QAE has proven an attractive governance tool.

The agenda feeds a *self-reinforcing* dynamic. As we hinted at this chapter's start, our research supports the argument that the technical process of measurement rather than the quality of education itself has become one of the main aims of education policy. In Chapter 6, we demonstrated that QAE data fail to give the kind of directions to policy or pedagogy which their producers claim. The use of data itself becomes a game, based on the "dynamics of trust and distrust". This is also seen at the local level, where there is little possibility to avoid QAE but where little use is seen in data collection (Chapter 7). The question of the nature of quality in education becomes side-lined in the process of its implementation. The results of this project, reported elsewhere, indicate that standardised testing feeds a need for more testing (Piattoeva & Saari 2018) and that quality becomes simultaneously a means of problematising education and providing a solution for it (Minina et al. 2018). In Chapter 7, we also pointed out that the schools which opposed QAE reforms faced the most difficult challenges.

Based on our work, we can say that QAE is a global phenomenon and a shared goal, and we have observed that it penetrates practice at global, national,

sub-national, and local levels. It should be remembered that this is not to say anything, yet, of the multiple direct and indirect consequences of QAE for education practice. The politics of quality bears a self-reinforcing dynamic which its actors largely share. Some critical rhetorical questions thus arise. If the lack of quality can be addressed only through more QAE, when is the promise of quality finally realised? Are we in an endless loop of *planning* an increasingly stringent, effective, all-encompassing system which will provide better evidence for decision-making?

Authorising but diverted governance

Due to the widespread view of how QAE education processes help to boost the quality of education and consequently the economy, the implementation of QAE confers much legitimacy. In policymaking, QAE data are used to legitimise decisions, a phenomenon extensively studied in comparative education and other research strands. In our study, instead of merely serving to legitimise, we found that transnational and national expert networks gained more room for action seeking justification with the help of QAE data. However, as in the previous dynamic, the implementation of governance seldom follows the original plan.

Authorisation happens on different scales. Brazil, China, and Russia have gradually gained greater geopolitical prominence and self-confidence. This is manifested in their decreasing dependency on international funding since the 1980s and 1990s, their growing roles in international organisations, and their increased transnational cooperation (Chapters 3 and 4). Geopolitical change was by no means due to QAE; rather, its new, more powerful role could also ensure more finely tuned governance, drawing on growing economic capacity and, arguably, more articulate global aims.

Chapter 3 traced the backdrop to the newly shaped political situation and its facilitation and restriction of the creation of QAE systems between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s. There was an opportune moment for the introduction of QAE in each context. The construction of Brazilian QAE combined problematic school expansion, federalism, decentralisation, and democratisation, at which point a QAE system seemed a feasible solution to govern a complex and politically delicate education system. Similarly, democratisation in the totally different post-Soviet context can be argued to have been a catalyst in Russia, but the system fragmented more dramatically because of marketisation, the devolution of central power, and education financing. This was an opportune moment for international organisations to introduce their perspective. In China, economic growth was seen as contingent on education and there was a longer tradition of QAE. In each context, international organisations' presence supported reforms in shaping the agenda.

QAE offered an apt solution at the historically opportune moments of democratisation and the state's crisis of legitimisation or its attempts to curb the effects of decentralisation. At such moments, international organisations and

cooperation helped to introduce QAE as a solution (Chapter 3). QAE was a key tool in steering this development and inserting general political aspirations into the education system. It is thus interesting to ask whether QAE has served the quality of education or the need to control. These two are not mutually exclusive, but the internal logic is that quality can only happen through tighter control.

As we have already established, there were variations in the different countries; reactions relate to the longer course of history in each context. In line with the transnational QAE agenda and drawing on the Soviet planning tradition, the expert community in Russia treats the "science of testing" in positivist terms and sees it as a valuable method for understanding social phenomena (Piattoeva & Gurova 2018). Although Brazilian experts' connections with international actors have been clear for decades, neither the idea of imposition nor regional factors seem likely causes of variation based on our review but rather the local relearning of QAE techniques (Kauko et al. 2016): Brazilian education policy has adopted practices from the global QAE agenda but has reflected the underlying ideology (Minina et al. 2018). The Chinese case is more nuanced, as shown in Chapters 4 and 5: experts can find some room for action, but the state authorities monitor their action more closely.

Various questions of authorisation arise in expert communities' room for action. Chapters 4 and 5 point to how expert communities are well-networked transnationally at the same time as they negotiate the area of their operation. For example, Russian experts are supportive of the QAE technology of the international organisations conducting international comparative assessment studies, while gaining authority and legitimacy for themselves. At the same time, they explicitly attempt to link international studies to the national context (Piattoeva & Gurova 2018). Experts also express views rooted in domestic pedagogical traditions, including QAE practices, indicating a wish to retain what they see as valuable in these traditions (Chapter 8). The grip of state authority on expert communities has somewhat weakened in China and Russia, while such control in Brazil has been almost absent. In all countries, the influence of expert communities has grown in ways policymakers have not always predicted. QAE's prominence in the education agenda enables expert communities to strengthen, because experts are among the few actors capable of producing data, the core commodity for sustaining the QAE system.

The implementation of QAE gets more *diverted* than meets the decision-maker's eye. Criticism of the theoretical notion of governance at a distance – the replacement of formal prescription with subjects' "voluntary" commitment to accountability through performance evaluation – was not among our initial premises. However, in the course of our research, it became increasingly obvious that this notion, typically formulated with reference to education policy developments in European countries, is a flawed perspective for an analysis of QAE as a model of governance in our case countries (which may or may not apply in other contexts). Our analysis has shown that as the interests of different groups of actors in how they react to QAE tools diverge or even collide, the

aim of governance at a distance is only partly achieved in education practice – or sometimes not at all.

Destabilising and reorganised role-setting

Our study found that QAE created new roles and changed old ones in different scales of operation. One of the key dynamics in the politics of quality in education thus lies in QAE's contribution to both destabilising and buttressing actor roles.

Chapter 4 sought an understanding of actor constellations in national political arenas and their connection with changes in the QAE infrastructure. Differences in this *reorganisation* emerged between the Brazilian case, where a large body of third-sector organisations had mobilised, and the less dynamic arenas of China and Russia. QAE has the potential to liberalise and marketise education because feedback channels from the education system are open and the formation of new civic actors proliferates to provoke debate and spark new movements. As Chapter 5 pointed out, this is clearly not the case in China and Russia. However, as Chapter 4 demonstrated, even in China and Russia, we could observe the expert communities' growing transnational networking. In relation to these countries' rising geopolitical aspirations, there is a tendency to curtail the significance of international organisations at the national level. These countries have been able to strengthen their steering of international organisations on quality in national education, while new actor constellations have created new degrees of instability, even if such instability is less marked in China and Russia.

As we concluded in Chapter 5,

> Policymakers' and experts' basic relationship with assessment data use differs. Whereas policymakers can work with or without data, experts depend on it. Whereas policymakers can bend interpretations, experts attempt to adhere to what is analysed. Experts' independence from state organs is another important issue. These differences in understanding data use also reflect the basic dynamic of the relationship between the state and experts.

The *destabilising* potential of politicking may be seen in QAE's influence on the latent conflicts between state and experts. Experts do not aspire to the role of political decision-makers, but they may be uneasy about how policymakers use data. However, policymakers understand the power of QAE data and the need to control its use (see Chapter 5).

In Chapter 7, our analysis of the effects of QAE on relations between local authorities and schools added a combination of governance theories and organisational analysis to our theoretical perspectives, to provide a better understanding of how QAE mechanisms could both provide and limit schools' access to new sources of power. While the comparative analysis of local education

practitioners added to the critique of the simplistic notion of governance at a distance, it went further by uncovering the diverse ways in which QAE policies can enhance and change local governance and outlined the potential room for action of schools subjected to performance evaluation. This room for action was more complex than "adaptation" or "resistance": some consequences and results had no connection with the original purpose.

It is clear the data being collected also have consequences for schools' position in a societal setting so complex that school-level actors see them not only as evidence for decision-making but as a game in which their own working conditions or moral choices are at stake. In this sense, QAE works according to a dynamic in which the schools seek to perform to governance, governance seeks to perform to policymakers, and policymakers seek to perform to their international and national peers and the public. This may also be seen as a regular accountability chain. However, we have already argued that QAE power at the local level eventually changes actor relations, albeit not uniformly, as Dahler-Larsen (2012) predicted. This, and the fact that all data flows include friction and productive power (Chapter 6), raises the question of QAE's actual efficacy as a governance tool.

As our research findings in Chapter 7 indicated, the local picture of the different actor roles in education is unsurprisingly complex. Russia is a good example of layeredness, whereby a mixture of different QAE models has prevailed during different periods. In the Russian case, ascribing change as convergence towards the West is therefore questionable. For example, as a Soviet legacy, equality of access remained a major principle in policy discourse and a legitimation of QAE (Gurova 2017). Nevertheless, surveillance techniques are being expanded in Russia with the help of equality discourse and merged with more traditional QAE practices (Piattoeva 2018). The Russian data suggest the local level suffers from the increased bureaucratisation of school work resulting from current education governance, which aims to account for everything (Gurova 2017). Russian teachers face a series of moral questions regarding the effects of QAE, in which policy and professional integrity are juxtaposed (Gurova & Piattoeva 2019). In the face of the multiple QAE techniques in use in Brazil (Kauko et al. 2016), schools may adopt different positions towards the intended control (Candido et al. submitted). In China, increased control has also increased the implementation responsibilities at the local level (Suominen et al. 2017). Although there are ways in which control is legitimised, there are serious degrees of destabilisation in local-level actors' work.

As researchers, we have had to come to terms with the destabilising potential embedded in QAE. In Chapter 2, in examining our research, we noted that we could learn something of QAE through the research process itself. It seemed that our participants reacted to our QAE research much as they would to QAE procedures themselves, either seeing it as a token or refusing cooperation. Bureaucracy sometimes sucked us into Kafkaesque mazes, which afforded a glimpse of the everyday reality of many of our interviewees. However, we formed the impression, especially at the local level, that the voice of single

teachers was not often heard and that they found a moment of empowerment in discussing the QAE steering tools which affected their everyday lives.

Behind and beyond quality

In relation to these dynamics, we believe we have made a convincing argument that the complexity of understanding the phenomena of politics of quality is embedded in the attempt to understand how it enables or hinders action. We started with the idea that politics is a means to control contingency. Where quality is concerned, QAE is a means to attempt to control what is done at different settings of action across all the contexts and institutions we have studied. We have elaborated this from the perspective of complexity, where it can be argued that attempts to control contingency increase the probability of action of one kind, while the probability of another decreases. Concretely, we argue in our research that the three dynamics described here are patterns which have become more probable in the politics of quality in education in Brazil, China, and Russia.

We recognise some limitations in our argument, however. Limited access to interviewees and observations and the issue of sensitivity in our data collection described in Chapter 2 have implications for the reliability and validity of the findings we report. Where reliability is concerned, we can first say that with better access to desired data in China and some of the potential key informants at the national level in Russia, we might have produced a more comprehensive and more nuanced picture of actor relations, data circulation, and the QAE enacted at the local level. At the same time, it is important to note that the concern here is not with the generalisability of our findings in the sense of their quantitative representativeness – even with more interviews and observations, our body of data in this sense would of course have remained very small. Instead, we emphasise that the value of our research's findings should be assessed by enquiring the extent to which we have contributed to a qualitative understanding of the issues we have analysed, for example, of the range of views expressed by interviewees rather than the perception of "the typical view" among different groups of actors or in each of the case countries.

With these reservations in mind, we certainly do not claim that our list of dynamics is exhaustive. As Chapter 2 discussed, there might be other possible interpretations of the research material we collected, because there might have been other *foci*. As this book concludes, we attempt to open some possible avenues for other interpretations, which may encourage further research on the politics of quality in education.

The notion that QAE has overtaken quality as a goal of education policy raises an interesting general question about how education is steered. There are many studies on the different techniques of governance, but this idea might be tested and developed by a deeper investigation of the comparison of policy and practice. This would especially require research on the use of knowledge in decision-making at different levels, possibly drawing on observation data, to

enable an analysis of the extent to which QAE data are really used or to which they are a performance or fabrication. If data are not used, why gather them?

The way in which governance becomes more complex while authorising new actors to function in the political arena is interesting. We have clearly indicated the endless bureaucracy involved in QAE, but during this project's long journey, we have grown increasingly interested in the local level of action in the contexts we have studied. We continue the analysis based on our data and stress the importance in understanding thoroughly how local actor relations change.

The destabilising feature of QAE policies, which reorganises actor relations, is an interesting finding from the perspective of contingency. While quality policies are a means to control contingency, in other respects, contingency grows. This is a particularly interesting finding in the cases of Russia and China, where increasing contingency is not always considered politically desirable. Neither seems to conform to the argument of the state's diminishing role in the face of globalisation, which some of the researchers discussed in Chapter 1 expected.

The emphasis in the governance-at-a-distance literature has been predominantly a phenomenon of the Global North, with its theory having its roots in France and the UK. Our focus has been on large countries, two of which, China and Russia, are quite hierarchical, while the other, Brazil, is less top-down managed. None of the yielded results support the idea that the governance-at-a-distance theory is a good description of what we have observed. We do not claim to offer universal results with our data, but we believe it could well be opportune now for scholars outside these vast linguistic and territorial regions to take note of the serious doubt cast on this theoretical tradition.

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