

Strengthening the connection between global evidence synthesis and local users

Clara Richards 2025

Table of contents

1.	What is "evidence" and what is "evidence synthesis"?	2
1.	1 Evidence	2
1.	2 Evidence synthesis	2
2.	Global research and their producers: are there "universal truths"?	4
2.	1 Global evidence	4
2.	2 Mid-range theories	5
2.	3 Dominance of a small group of actors	5
3.	What is "evidence use"?	6
	4. Who are the users of evidence in the Global South and what evidence do the use?	
	To what extent do local decision-makers use global evidence synthesis? llenges to their use	7
	What mechanisms could enhance connections between the supply and in- ntry demand of evidence?	9
6.	1 Key recommendations for strengthening evidence use locally	9
6.	2 Building a more equitable evidence system	11
Refe	erences	12



1. What is "evidence" and what is "evidence synthesis"?

1.1 Evidence

There is ongoing debate about what constitutes evidence and high-quality evidence, particularly in education—more so than in fields like public health, where a single "killer study" can decisively inform decision-making (UNESCO, 2024; Broadbent & Hayter, 2024). School boards, teachers, policymakers, and researchers often disagree on which types of evidence are most useful, when, and for what purpose (Tseng, 2012, in Hayter & Morales, 2023).

Three main types of evidence are commonly used (Hayter & Morales, 2023):

- **Research evidence:** Includes professional literature, systematic reviews, evidence gap maps (e.g. UNICEF), implementation research, and cost-benefit analyses like Smart Buys (Akyeampong et al., 2023), with growing emphasis on qualitative and mixed-methods research.
- Sector-generated data: Comprises student assessments, surveys, attendance, and retention metrics, often supported by decentralised data systems such as EMIS.
- Practice-informed advice: Insights from trusted sources, such as consultants, universities, and professional associations, where trust shapes policymakers' reliance on advice.

Funders and researchers often equate "good evidence" with scientifically generated research. However, this approach can be criticised as reductionist, overlooking locally produced knowledge. Inequities within and between knowledge systems—especially across income levels—shape perceptions of whose knowledge is valued (Hayter & Morales, 2023). In practice, decision-making relies on multiple forms of evidence rather than a single dominant source.

1.2 Evidence synthesis

Evidence synthesis is a systematic approach to gathering, analysing, and integrating findings from multiple studies to provide a comprehensive understanding of a topic or research question. It identifies patterns, inconsistencies, gaps, and robust conclusions across a body of research. Common methods include systematic reviews, meta-analyses, scoping reviews, and narrative syntheses (Gough et al., 2017).



A synthesis consolidates existing research to present what is collectively known on a subject. A transparent methodology should outline how studies are identified, selected, appraised, and analysed, assessing the strength of evidence to address specific questions.

"The feedback loop between what is produced at the global level and what is required at the local level or national level is broken." (UNESCO 2024, p. 15)

In theory, evidence synthesis ensures all relevant studies are assessed together, helping to identify research gaps, prioritise needs, improve quality, prevent duplication, and reduce wasted effort (Evidence Synthesis International, n.d.). However, producing syntheses requires expertise, time, and resources, which do not always align with policy decision-making cycles and capacities.

To address these challenges, the evidence synthesis community has introduced faster, more responsive tools, such as co-produced evidence maps, living reviews, and responsive evidence services (Evidence Synthesis International, n.d.).

"A key challenge is language barriers. Most studies are published in English...., and scientific language isn't always usable for decision-makers." (Interview with Laura Boeira, 2025).

However, these innovations remain led by a minority and are more established in the Global North—particularly in health—while still emerging in education (Stewart et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the global research system favours studies from high-income countries and English-language publications, limiting the inclusion of research from non-English sources. While evidence syntheses aim for transparency and comprehensiveness, knowledge production is inherently shaped by inequalities (Mendizabal, 2013).



2. Global research and their producers: are there "universal truths"?

2.1 Global evidence

Evidence syntheses aim to assess the broader evidence base on an issue rather than individual studies. Their goal is to generate global evidence that informs policies and practices worldwide. This refers to research findings or practices proven effective across diverse contexts, particularly at scale, and validated through replication in comparable settings (Interview with Kwame Akyeampong, 2025). Such research should be systematic, transparent, and comprehensive, ensuring accessibility to teachers, policymakers, and leaders—without being restricted by paywalls or technical jargon.

However, the idea of universal truths in education is highly contested (Hattie, 2009; Biesta, 2007; Alexander, 2001). While research syntheses can identify effective methods across multiple contexts, true universal truths—factors that explain educational challenges and effective interventions everywhere—are rare. Education is shaped by cultural, social, economic, political, and individual factors, meaning that strategies effective in one context may not easily transfer to another.

"I don't think that universal truths really exist....it is important that certain norms and standards and principles of translating and using evidence are being promoted and disseminated." (Interview with Tanja Kuchenmuller, 2025)

Research syntheses often identify best practices or widely applicable principles, but these seldom establish universally applicable methods. Instead, they offer evidence-informed approaches that require adaptation to specific contexts for optimal outcomes. This distinction between global evidence, which seeks to demonstrate causal impacts, and local evidence, which identifies conditions for success, is crucial (Morales, forthcoming). A common critique is that evidence syntheses from the Global North often fail to be relevant or effective in the Global South due to contextual differences. As Akyeampong noted in our interview, defining the scope and applicability of global evidence is essential to avoid mischaracterising findings as universally effective.



2.2 Mid-range theories

Some mid-range theories—principles that are broadly applicable but require adaptation—do exist. For example, "providing students with feedback on their work generally improves learning outcomes, a principle likely to hold true in both Cameroon and the United Kingdom" (Interview with Jonathan Kay, 2025). The challenge lies in distinguishing the core components that should remain unchanged from those requiring adaptation for effective implementation.

2.3 Dominance of a small group of actors

Global research production remains concentrated in high-income countries where large research organisations, universities, and multilateral initiatives have the resources and expertise to conduct comprehensive evidence syntheses and English capabilities to publish through official channels. This is particularly true in North America, Europe, and Australia, where such institutions set much of the global research agenda. In contrast, low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) face challenges in generating evidence syntheses due to limited funding, capacity, and access to published research. As a result, global evidence syntheses often fail to reflect the needs and contexts of LMICs (Gough et al., 2017).

"For instance, a research team might synthesize studies on early literacy interventions and co-design practical workshops for teachers and families in a community-led reading campaign [...] synthesizing evidence in this way can support a wide range of actors—from classroom teachers and grassroots organizers to district officials and NGO staff—by offering practical, locally relevant approaches to enhancing learning."
(Morales, forthcoming).

Several initiatives seek to address this imbalance. For example, the Education Endowment Foundation supplements its research findings with toolkits designed for teachers and local education stakeholders. Similarly, the Jacobs Foundation supports EdLabs worldwide to produce research that contributes to a global evidence base while incorporating local context. These EdLabs now integrate a broader range of methodologies, including cohort studies, case-control studies, and qualitative research, to capture a more nuanced picture of educational settings (Interview with Natalia Gonzalez, 2025). The What Works Hub is also piloting rapid and iterative programme testing aligned with policymakers' decision-making cycles. Such initiatives help to diversify the institutions contributing to global evidence synthesis.



3. What is "evidence use"?

The education sector applies various frameworks to understand evidence use, often drawing on Gough et al.'s (2011) taxonomy. More recent examples include the Global Commission on Evidence's four types of use (2022) and Goldman and Pabari's (2020) categorisation based on African case studies. These frameworks typically distinguish different types of use at the individual and organisational levels:

- Conceptual use: building knowledge and awareness.
- Instrumental use: informing individual decisions.
- Process or embedded use: informing ongoing, systematic processes.

For further reading on the different types of evidence use, see Hayter and Morales (2023) 3).

4. Who are the users of evidence in the Global South and what evidence do they use?

Defining evidence users is complex, as the boundaries between those who generate and those who use evidence often overlap. This paper focuses on two main groups:

- **Policymakers:** individuals involved in policy formulation, implementation, and stakeholder engagement, including high-level policymakers and civil servants at local, national, and global levels.
- **Practitioners:** those engaged in education practice, such as teachers, school managers, and implementers. Despite their crucial role in the evidence ecosystem, they are sometimes overlooked (Broadbent & Hayter, 2024). They generate, engage with, learn from, and disseminate different forms of evidence.

These groups intersect, particularly among subnational officials and NGOs managing local initiatives. Other key actors include think tanks, EdLabs, donor-funded projects, and organisations often categorised as evidence use initiatives (Broadbent & Hayter, 2024). These operate at multiple levels—from the global to the school and community level—each with distinct needs and motivations. For a broader categorisation of key actors, see Hayter and Morales (2023).



Users draw on both local and global evidence based on their specific needs. Local evidence addresses immediate, context-specific challenges, such as culturally relevant teaching strategies, while global evidence syntheses provide best practices and add credibility to policymaking (Mendizabal et al., 2024).

The education sector has traditionally regarded randomised controlled trials (RCTs) as the gold standard (e.g. J-PAL, MineduLab). However, RCTs have been criticised for oversimplifying complex issues, and research suggests that impact evaluations have a limited influence on policy decisions (Rao, 2025). Broader initiatives, such as WB EdStats and the Global Partnership for Education, promote the use of diverse data sources.

Evidence use in education is inherently collaborative, integrating insights from evaluation studies, administrative data, community feedback, and lived experiences (Morales, forthcoming). Recognising this diversity is essential to tailoring research that is both relevant and useful for all users (Hayter & Morales, 2023).

5. To what extent do local decision-makers use global evidence synthesis? Challenges to their use

Evidence use is shaped by technical, cultural, and political factors. While global evidence syntheses have significant potential to inform local decision-making, several barriers restrict their broader application. Below are key challenges relevant to shaping an Education Evidence Architecture:

• Norms and values: Evidence generation and use are shaped by social, cultural, and political norms (Parkhurst, 2017). The belief that development knowledge is universally transferable has been widely challenged (Koch & Weingart, 2016). Global evidence syntheses often fail to account for local knowledge systems, traditional expertise, and embedded ways of knowing (Nutley, Walter & Davies, 2007). Policymakers may reject global evidence when it contradicts national narratives or local experiences (Boaz, Oliver & Cairney, 2019).

"Everybody says 'this and this works, what is the government doing about it?'—that doesn't help. But when people come and ask, 'What problems are you facing, and what type of research could help you right now?'—that's much more helpful."



(Interview with a Ministry of Education official-Brazil, 2025)

- **Usefulness:** Policymakers are more likely to use evidence that is contextually relevant. Studies show that they are more receptive to findings from other lowand middle-income countries than from high-income settings, as they perceive greater applicability (Crawfurd et al., 2021). Evidence from different governance and institutional contexts may be seen as irrelevant or impractical, limiting cross-country learning (Stewart, 2015).
- **Relevance:** Global research agendas often overshadow national-level issues due to donor priorities and research funding structures. As a result, local concerns are underexplored, making global evidence less relevant for policymakers in specific settings (Oliver & Cairney, 2019). Decision-makers often prefer research that directly aligns with their immediate policy questions rather than broad, generalisable findings (Newman, Fisher & Shaxson, 2012).

"I don't think it's very useful for someone who has done a global synthesis to talk directly to a minister of education. They don't know the local challenges, and it's better to strengthen links between policymakers and national knowledge actors."

(Interview with Andrea Ordonez, 2025)

- Stakeholder engagement: Evidence use is not just about availability but also about how it is communicated and brokered (Liverani, Hawkins & Parkhurst, 2013). Successful evidence uptake requires intermediaries, including policy advisors, advocacy networks, and research communicators (Oliver, Innvar, Lorenc, Woodman & Thomas, 2014). However, global evidence syntheses are rarely locally led, weakening regional evidence ecosystems (UNESCO, 2024 in Hayter & Morales, 2023). Even when strong local organisations conduct syntheses, they often struggle with funding constraints and competition from larger international organisations (Broadbent & Hayter, 2024).
- **Political and institutional barriers:** The extent to which evidence is used depends on political will, institutional culture, and policymaking dynamics (Head, 2016). Research that challenges existing political agendas or entrenched interests is often ignored or dismissed (Cairney, 2016). Additionally, decision-makers may rely on informal networks and expert opinion rather than formal research syntheses (Boswell & Smith, 2017).
- **Timeliness and accessibility:** Evidence must align with policy cycles to be useful (Nutley et al., 2007). Policymakers often need rapid insights, while systematic reviews and meta-analyses take time to produce. Further, much



global research is behind paywalls or written in technical language, limiting accessibility for local decision-makers (Parkhurst, 2017).

6. What mechanisms could enhance connections between the supply and in-country demand of evidence?

As highlighted throughout this brief, evidence use depends on a dynamic relationship between research and policymaking. To ensure societal impact, local research must align with policy priorities. This requires a shift in global evidence production, empowering researchers in LMICs with the resources and decision-making authority to determine research priorities and methodologies. A reformed Education Evidence Architecture must incorporate diverse perspectives to address complex challenges equitably and sustainably (Harle & Echt, 2024).

"In Brazil, we have a lot of WhatsApp groups of people connected to education and evidence. We just gather in these WhatsApp groups and send each other new evidence and discuss it. It's more alive than any formal briefings because there are people in those groups who worked on the research or know the researchers. So, they can also explain the details—like, why this evidence worked or didn't work. It's a more dynamic way of exchanging evidence."

(Interview with a Ministry of Education official-Brazil, 2025)

6.1 Key recommendations for strengthening evidence use locally

The following recommendations, drawn from the literature and interviews, highlight critical shifts needed to bridge the gap between global evidence supply and local demand:

Reform global evidence production

Prioritise locally led research: Increase funding and capacity for evidence production in, on, and by local research institutions and researchers to enhance contextual relevance.



- Revise research agenda-setting: Ensure that research priorities reflect local policy needs rather than external donor interests.
- Expand definitions of research quality: Move beyond rigid hierarchies of evidence to value relevance, accessibility, and usability (Parkhurst, 2017).
- Encourage participatory and policy-relevant research: Strengthen coproduction models that involve policymakers, practitioners, and communities in the research process (Oliver & Cairney, 2019).
- Leverage think tanks, advisory bodies, EdLabs, and policy labs: Support locally embedded research networks to drive change and sustain engagement.
- ✓ Pair global evidence with local expertise: Ensure that evidence syntheses are interpreted and applied in ways that reflect local contexts.

"A certain degree of coordination among funders could help to build the capacity of all members of the education research system, rather than funding singular research projects that look at education simply as a technical issue."

(AERFC, 2022)

Strengthen user engagement and research uptake

- ✓ Embed user-centred pathways into research projects: Allocate dedicated resources to ensure findings are communicated effectively to decision-makers (Boaz et al., 2019). See <u>Jacobs Foundation's alignment</u> framework.
- ✓ Develop formal and informal mechanisms for evidence exchange: Support platforms such as policy networks, WhatsApp groups, and practitioner forums for real-time knowledge-sharing (Interview with Ministry of Education official, Brazil, 2025).
- ✓ Treat evidence synthesis as an iterative, co-owned process: Prioritise end-user engagement throughout the research cycle.
- ✓ Improve understanding of how policymakers interact with evidence: Identify what types of evidence are used, under what conditions, and by whom.



"Knowledge systems don't need to be completely efficient or centralised. Redundancy can be valuable, like in natural systems, where duplication exists for resilience. Transparency and better information-sharing are more important, so researchers know what others are doing." (Interview with Andrea Ordonez, 2025)

• Promote learning, adaptation, and sustainable partnerships

- ✓ Monitor and evaluate evidence-use initiatives rigorously: Assess the effectiveness of efforts to improve knowledge translation.
- ✓ Encourage transparency in knowledge-sharing: Recognise that redundancy in knowledge systems can enhance learning by enabling researchers to build on existing work rather than duplicate it (Interview with Andrea Ordoñez, 2025).
- ✓ Support equitable, long-term research partnerships: Strengthen globallocal collaborations with clear expectations and mutual benefits (Liverani, Hawkins & Parkhurst, 2013).
- Document and disseminate lessons learned: Ensure that findings inform broader stakeholder engagement, including local funders and policymakers.

6.2 Building a more equitable evidence system

The education sector is at a pivotal moment, with an opportunity to reshape global evidence use. Achieving this transformation requires bold action to address entrenched imbalances in global research production models. The upcoming March 2025 meeting hosted by the Jacobs Foundation represents a key moment to begin building a more equitable and effective system. Informants in this brief recommend that efforts to develop a new evidence architecture incorporate additional questions on funding, power dynamics, and institutional incentives (see On EdLabs: onthinktanks.org/onedlabs).



References

- Akyeampong, K., Lussier, K., Pryor, J., & Westbrook, J. (2013). Improving teaching and learning of basic maths and reading in Africa: Does teacher preparation count? International journal of educational development, 33(3), 272-282. https://d1wqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/53622454/j.ijedudev.2012.09.00620170622-3726-rrunh6-libre.pdf?
- Alexander, R. J. (2001). Border crossings: Towards a comparative pedagogy. Comparative Education, 37(4), https://diwqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/96823923/Alexander-2001-Border-crossing-Towards-a-comparative-pedagogy-libre.pdf?
- African Education Research Funding Consortium (AERFC) (2022). Guiding recommendations for the Consortium for Education Research in/for/by Africa a long list. https://educationresearchafrica.notion.site/Guiding-recommendations-for-the-Consortium-for-Education-Research-in-for-by-Africa-a-long-list-b4d5897ec5f64fbc877d51ba2093234c
- African Education Research Funders Consortium (AERFC) (2022). Forum for Education Research in/for/by Africa.

 https://educationresearchafrica.notion.site/Forum-for-Education-Research-in-for-by-Africa-ff6476d339f84e8ea4bfdoe476e2boa6
- Biesta, G. (2007). Why "what works" won't work: Evidence-based practice and the democratic deficit in educational research. Educational theory, 57(1), 1-22. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdfdirect/10.1111/j.1741-5446.2006.00241.x
- Boaz, A., Oliver, K., & Cairney, P. (2019). Evidence-based policy making: The importance of issue framing and the problem definition stage. Palgrave Communications, 5, 1–12.
- Crawfurd, L., Hares, S., Minardi, A., & Sandefur, J. (2021). Understanding education policy preferences: Survey experiments with policymakers in 35 developing countries (No. 596). Washington, DC: Center for Global Development. https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/understanding-education-policy-preferences-survey-experiments-policymakers-35-developing.pdf
- Draman, R., Titriku, A., Lampo, I., Hayter, E., Holden, K. (2017) Evidence in African Parliaments. ACEPA, INASP, QMUL.
- https://www.inasp.info/evidenceinparliaments Evidence Synthesis International (n.d.). What is Evidence Synthesis?
- https://evidencesynthesis.org/what-is-evidencesynthesis/#:~:text=Evidence%20synthesis%20is%20the%20interpretation,for
 %20translating%20research%20in%20decisions
- Global Commission on Evidence to Address Societal Challenges. (2022). The Evidence Commission report: A wake-up call and path forward for decisionmakers, evidence intermediaries, and impact-oriented evidence producers. McMaster



- Health Forum. https://www.mcmasterforum.org/docs/default-source/evidence-commission-report.pdf?sfvrsn=2fb92517 11
- Goldman., I and Pabari, M., (2020) An introduction to evidence informed policy making in Africa' in Evidence in Policy and Practice: Lessons from Africa. https://www.routledge.com/Using-Evidence-in-Policy-and-Practice-Lessons-from%20Africa/Goldman-Pabari/p/book/9780367440077,%20p13-34.
- Gorur, R., Landri, P., & Normand, R. (Eds.). (2023) Rethinking Sociological Critique in Contemporary Education: Reflexive Dialogue and Prospective Inquiry. Taylor & Francis.
- Gough D., Tripney J., Kenny C., & Buk-Berge, E. (2011). Evidence Informed Policy in Education in Europe: EIPEE final project report. EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London. https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/1472680/
- Gough, D., Thomas, J., & Oliver, S. (2017). An introduction to systematic reviews. Sage Publications. https://www.torrossa.com/en/resources/an/5019303
- Harle, J., and Echt, L. (2024) Economic Advisory Work: knowledge inequities in the global South, OTT. https://onthinktanks.org/articles/economic-advisory-work-knowledge-inequities-in-the-global-south/
- Hattie, J. (2009). The black box of tertiary assessment: An impending revolution.

 Tertiary assessment & higher education student outcomes: Policy, Practice & Research, 259, 275. https://wp-prd.let.ethz.ch/wp-content/uploads/sites/1307/2022/03/Hattie-Studie-2009.pdf
- Hayter, E., and Morales, M. (2023) Review: Policy Labs and Evidence Use in Education, Produced by OTT Consulting for the Jacobs Foundation. https://jacobsfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Review-Policy-labs-and evidence-use-in-education.docx.pdf
- IDRC. Research Quality Plus: https://idrc-crdi.ca/en/rqplus
- Langer, L., Tripney, J. & Gough, D. (2016). The Science of Using Science: Researching the Use of Research Evidence in Decision-Making. EPPI Centre, Social Science Research Unit, UCL Institute of Education, University College London. https://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/cms/Portals/o/PDF%20reviews%20and%20summaries/Science%202016%20Langer%20report.pdf?ver=2016-04-18-142701-867
- Langer, L., & Weyrauch, V. (2021). Using evidence in Africa: a framework to assess what works, how and why. In Goldman and Pabari, eds. (2021). Using Evidence from policy and practice: lessons from Africa. Routledge. https://www.routledge.com/Using-Evidence-in-Policy-and-Practice-Lessons-from-Africa/Goldman-Pabari/p/book/9780367440077/
- Liverani, M., Hawkins, B., & Parkhurst, J. O. (2013). Political and institutional influences on the use of evidence in public health policy: A systematic review. PLOS ONE, 8(10), e77404.
- Mendizabal, E., (2013). Blog: What is research uptake and how can it be measured? On Think Tanks. https://onthinktanks.org/articles/research-uptake-what-is-it-and-can-it-be-measured/
- Mendizabal, E., (2024) Blog: Oldies but Goldies: A look back at the literature on evidence informed policy and think tanks. On Think Tanks.



- https://onthinktanks.org/articles/oldies-but-goldies-a-look-back-at-the-literature-on-evidence-informed-policy-and-think-tanks/
- Mendizabal, E., (2025). Blog: Rethinking evidence-informed policy and scaling: lessons, challenges, and opportunities. On Think Tanks.

 https://onthinktanks.org/articles/rethinking-evidence-informed-policy-and-scaling-lessons-challenges-and-opportunities/
- OECD (2022). Who Cares about Using Education Research in Policy and Practice?: Strengthening Research Engagement. OECD Publishing. https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/who-cares-about-using-education-research-in-policy-and-practice d7ff793d-en.html
- Oliver, S., Bangpan, M., Stansfield, C., & Stewart, R. (2015). Capacity for conducting systematic reviews in low-and middle-income countries: a rapid appraisal. Health research policy and systems, 13, 1-8. https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1186/s12961-015-0012-0.pdf
- Oliver, K., & Cairney, P. (2019). The dos and don'ts of influencing policy: A systematic review of advice to academics. Palgrave Communications, 5, 21.
- Parkhurst, J. (2017). The politics of evidence: From evidence-based policy to the good governance of evidence. Routledge.
- Rao, M. (2025). Program Evaluations and Policy Spending. https://michelle-rao.github.io/website papers/O1 papers/Rao policyCCTs.pdf
- Stewart, R., Dayal, H., Langer, L., et al. (2019). The evidence ecosystem in South Africa: growing resilience and institutionalisation of evidence use. Palgrave Commun 5, 90.https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-019-0303-0
- Tseng, V. (2012). The Uses of Research in Policy and Practice. Social Policy Report, 26(2). https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED536954.pdf
- UNESCO (2024) Strategic Review of Global and Regional Evidence and Knowledge Initiatives, Networks and Platforms in Education UNESCO Global Education Coordination Mechanism. https://www.norrag.org/improving-use-evidence%20education-policy/
- Weyrauch, V., Echt, L. and Suliman, S. 2016, May. Knowledge into policy: Going beyond context matters. Framework. Politics & Ideas and the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications.

 https://www.inasp.info/sites/default/files/2024-03/Going%20beyond%20context%20matters%20%E2%80%93%20framework.pdf





A global consultancy and platform for change

www.onthinktanks.org