Are global learning metrics feasible?

From ‘simplifimetrification’ to context-sensitive, pluralized educational evaluations

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Having worked for nearly three decades on different Latin American educational systems on the relationships between social justice and schools, I would like to contribute to this meeting on Global Learning Metrics with two arguments.

The first one is about the need to have a plurilingual conversation, and by that I mean not only being able to consider how education is thought and practiced in different regions and countries, but also to think about education as a complex, multidimensional process. I would like to question that many of the data are produced in or by organizations that take into account little more than a sixth of the population of the world (OCDE countries have approx. 1.3 billion inhabitants, while the world population is approx. 7.5 billion; PISA does better, but still some parts of the globe are overrepresented). It has been said that GLM tends to make the world flat and homogeneous (Rizvi and Lingard, 2009), reduced to some indicators that can measure how a given school system performs (Welch, 2015). The risks of neo-colonialism are quite clear, not only because some perspectives about what a good school is are more present than others, but also because these organizations have been quite arrogant in their claims about knowing it all about school performance and learning. I would like to stress that we need a more plural dialogue, considering the different educational traditions and the complex contexts in which schools work. The feasibility of GLM depends on having these other conversations, probably lengthy and difficult, in order to come to more plural indicators about schooling and learning in different contexts. That would mean not only having more diverse personnel in the agencies but also including really heterogeneous perspectives on schools, measurement, and evaluation.

The second is related to the reduction of education to learning, and of learning to that which can be measured. This “simplifimetrification” (Fischman, 2016) reduces what goes on in schools to individual performances in math, language, and science tests, or to responses in questionnaires. Whole educational systems are judged as inutile or failing because their children are not performing well in these tests (Hardy & Lewis, 2016). How are their multiple functions considered in these indicators? Schools not only teach content knowledge but they also, and probably most importantly, teach about cohabiting a common space, sharing some references, listening to each other, developing particular identities (as a learner, as a member of a particular group). In a recently published ethnographic study on the learning lives of young people in a multicultural, multilingual London school, Sonia Livingstone and Julian Sefton-Green (2016) stress that the school, or better said the teacher they studied, was concerned about teaching a certain civility that could make the students understand each other across languages and cultures. In our contemporary world, where rifts are expanding and isolationism is on the rise, I wonder if there is a more important task than teaching this kind of civility. Perhaps we need to overcome the ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant, 2011) of the rhetoric of the knowledge society, and focus ourselves on how we as humans are preparing ourselves for the big challenges we face these times: how to build a more sustainable world, more peaceful, in which we can carry on with our lives, and enrich and expand them by living together. How is GLM addressing these issues? I think the question has to be reverted to the agencies that are producing the evaluations. Can they speak about these issues, and in what terms?

It can be argued that this criticism is out of place since GLM is only concerned about measuring skills related to cognitive
functions -even if by that, they leave out one of the basic functions of education nowadays. However, I would like to argue that these cognitive skills are not universal givens. Is reading a decontextualized practice, independent from how, to what extent, a given society values the printed letter or its multilingualism? How much do problem-solving skills relate to cultural and epistemic assumptions that are particular to some societies, or even some portions of these societies, as the Western, generally protestant cultures where selves with individually-oriented goals are perceived as the norm? Also, are these problem-solving skills taught in schools, or are they learned through a long process of socialization that begins in the cradle and continues throughout daily life, media, community bonds? Why make it a case of educational systems’ performance? Why are other skills -surviving in harsh conditions, learning to decipher a complex and opaque world, such as those learned by children who live in shanty towns in India, Mexico or Brazil- not equally valued by the tests and international agencies? They might be more important in this world’s future.

I have done research both on digital literacies and on citizenship education in Argentina and Mexico. These two fields, increasingly important in our digitally-mediated global world, are not well represented in GLM. For example, several standards for digital literacies (EU, USA, etc) have been produced that intend to grasp what schools teach on this new area, but these standards do not do well with learning that is mostly invisible, or hard to account for (Cobo and Moravec, 2010), as verbalization is not always and not mainly the mode of representation in which this learning is experienced. Also, and as it has already been said in relation to problem-solving skills, are these literacies taught in schools, or are they learned in contexts that are much larger? I will bring some examples from PISA’s digital skills and other Latin American experiences with measuring them (Chile).

In relation to citizenship education, in my research I have been concerned about human rights and civics education, particularly in societies that have gone or are undergoing severe violations of human rights and that experienced or experience weak law enforcement by the state, and where this kind of teaching is vital for the sustainability and strengthening of democracies. I have learnt that writing or speaking up in these contexts is not easy: silence is many times a survival strategy (Das, 2015). Not knowing, feigning ignorance, might be a learning skill more valuable than managing school content. I raise this point not only to underline that tests, at least the ones we have today, are incapable of capturing this complexity, but also to say that focusing on tests and metrics instead of on the complexities of how we teach and learn about these issues is more important, and that this conversation is obscured and marginalized by the current frenzy and hysteria about PISA results (Biesta, 2015). I cannot feel but a sense of despair that so much energy is put on complying with the mandates of international agencies that are not relevant, not only for the so-called Global South, Third or underdeveloped world, but also for the so-called North, where there are similar pressing demands and rifts that have to do with how we define what a good society is, and how we build it today.

Can GLM help in that process? Can we redefine this metrics to make some room for other measurements that take into account these processes of building a good society, and of building a good school? I would like to see a shift from learning to schooling, that would express more concern and preoccupation with what happens in schools (and not augmenting the critical, destructive rhetoric on schooling). And I would like that the agencies that are producing these metrics are more sensitive to the complexities of the global, of national and subnational contexts, of the different rhythms and traditions that each country or region has. We have to produce some spaces, and I hope this venue will help in that process, to sustain more plural conversations about what is being measured, in which language, by whom, with what effects, and what is being left out, and with what effects.

References


