Can global learning metrics be pedagogically innovative?

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Global learning metrics depend on standardisation, which is antithetical to innovation. Everything from the definition of ‘school’ and ‘student’, to what is to be valued as ‘outcomes’ of education, to how to measure ‘performance’, ‘quality’ and ‘equity’ must be standardised before any global comparative metrics can be developed. In projects of large-scale measurement, the outliers (and innovators, by definition, are non-standard) are regarded as a nuisance, because they skew the data and distort patterns. They are often weeded out in the analyses.

So from the outset, global learning metrics are projects of convergence and harmonisation, rather than of accommodating difference – and ‘difference’ is key to innovation. It is a normative and regulatory mechanism that pushes for conformity and suppresses the outliers, the idiosyncratic and, by extension, the innovators. By its very nature, the standardisation that underpins global metrics is designed to ignore rather than highlight innovation.

One of the most striking effects of global learning metrics over the last couple of decades has been that education policies globally have been in a constant state of ‘reform’. In many countries, rankings on international large-scale comparative assessments (ILSAs) have mobilised anxieties about ‘slipping’ and ‘falling behind’ in an assumed global, zero-sum game, and a slew of reforms have been mobilised in a bid to reverse this, or to ‘stay on top’ in the league tables. In many cases, such anxieties have led to more stringent accountability requirements and closer monitoring of student performance as well as of teachers and schools.

On the whole, I would argue, this has led to more conservative policies and schooling practices than it has to pedagogic innovation. To support this argument, I raise the following points:

- The standardisation of norms in school and teacher practice encouraged by global learning metrics tends to run counter to innovation and risk-taking. It encourages perverse effects through gaming and allows teachers to innovate only within narrowly-framed curriculum spaces
- Global learning metrics are aimed at policy and there is a big gap (of both logic and of practical politics) between policy reform and classroom practices
- Global learning metrics attempt to steer reforms to emulate ‘best practice’ – but ‘reform’ is not the same as ‘innovation’. Pedagogic innovation, in particular, is rarely prompted by imposed reforms. It is necessarily led by teachers and schools.
Policy Focus
The immediate focus of large-scale assessments and global metrics is to inform policy rather than classroom practice or pedagogy directly. IEA for example, seeks to ‘assist policymakers in identifying the relative strengths and weaknesses of their education systems’, and the OECD highlights PISA’s ‘policy orientation, with design and reporting methods determined by the needs of governments to draw policy lessons’ as a key feature of PISA. Both TIMSS and PISA, however, also imply that, directly or indirectly, there are lessons from their assessments for classroom practice and for pedagogic innovation. TIMSS makes greater claim for providing data that may more directly inform classroom practices, since their assessments are classroom-based and linked to curriculum – by testing 8th graders in intact classes, TIMSS results can be directly linked to particular teachers and schools and students. The TIMSS video studies tried to make the connection between classroom practices and performance more explicit, and to focus more on documenting different practices. PISA, on the other hand, tests by age, and includes 15-year-olds scattered across grade levels and taught by different teachers. Nevertheless, it claims that it can point to ‘best practice’ and produces a range of ‘lessons for’ reports with recommendations for policy that could impact classroom practices.

International assessments can demonstrate some broad-brush patterns in the performance of countries on the learning areas being assessed. Regular cycles of assessment can provide useful information with regard to trends in performance. However, such assessments cannot bear the enormous burden that is being placed on them to ‘tell’ policymakers what to do (Gorur, 2011). The psychometricians and statisticians involved in these studies, many of whom I have interviewed over several projects, appear bewildered that so much faith is placed on these measures.

Nevertheless, organisations such as the OECD actively seek to influence reform, and nations do indeed base reforms on global comparisons. The influence of the OECD on national policies and practices has been well documented (Gorur, 2016; Hopkins, Pennock, Ritzen, Ahtariadou, & Zimmer, 2008). But, basing reforms on average performance can be wasteful and even damaging, as we found in the case of Australia (Gorur & Wu, 2014). Rather than focus on within-country differences, directing resources into particular areas of need, and conserving all that is good in the system, a panic about how we are ‘slipping’ in international rankings has led to much more centralised control with sweeping, rather than focused and targeted, changes, to the detriment of our students and some of our states and territories, particularly those with large Indigenous populations. Secondary analysis, which looks beyond the rankings to more perform more detailed analysis, has its own pitfalls and limitations too (Rutkowski, Gonzalez, Joncas, & von Davier, 2010).

Global learning metrics are a product of globalisation as well as active contributors to it. As such, they promote, deliberately or otherwise, a *convergence* of policy by producing role models to emulate, rather than expanding the policy imaginary or encouraging policy innovation by highlighting a range of models. Although different nations understand and take up the ‘policy lessons’ produced by global comparisons quite differently, global metrics have led to the creation of a globalised policy field (Lingard, Rawolle & Taylor, 2005) which influences and limits the possibilities of innovation.

Requirements of Pedagogic Innovation
What is ‘pedagogic innovation’, and what does it entail? As a teacher and a curriculum leader for 25 years in schools in Nigeria, Oman, India and Australia, I have been engaged in many reform and innovation efforts. A principal difference I found between ‘reform’ and ‘innovation’ in schools is that reform involved the planned imposition of a pre-determined model, whereas ‘innovation’ often arose unexpectedly and proceeded in ways that were not pre-planned. Generally, successful innovation starts from questions or dissatisfaction of some sort. In one case, a major school-wide curriculum innovation effort arose from my puzzlement over why the six-year-olds in my Grade 1 classroom could not solve a certain mathematics word problem. Global metrics may provide the impetus for reforms – they may advocate that certain practices be emulated. They speak in terms of ‘lessons to be learned’ and ‘models’ to learn from. In other words, even the reforms that global metrics may advocate are about *conformity* rather than innovation. Global comparisons provide role models and ‘reference societies’ (Waldow, 2014), rather than an invitation for doing something new and radical.

Global metrics aim to highlight ‘best practices’. The argument is that if a nation performs well on international surveys, the practices they use must be ‘best practices’ which we can learn from and apply – even if in a modified way – in our own countries. But there is no reason to believe that just because certain practices are used in high-performing nation, those practices are ‘best practices’. For all we know, that country might have performed even better with a different set of practices. Moreover, if we looked beyond the countries that performed well, we might find that low-performing school systems also used same practices! So the premise of the ‘best practices’ argument needs to be questioned. Innovations typically are – or at least start off as – small-scale and local. Seldom are untested ideas funded as large-scale projects. As such, they are unlikely to be picked up in ILSA surveys. So even where innovative practices might be occurring, global metrics are unlikely to pick them up in their sample-based surveys and so they are unlikely to highlight them. But, just to play along with the argument that global comparisons highlight ‘best practice’ for a moment, let us look at some of the high-

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1. [http://www.iea.nl/about_us.html](http://www.iea.nl/about_us.html)
performing nations and what kind of practices they use. If we examine the East Asian economies – Shanghai (China), Hong Kong (China), Singapore and Korea – there are a number of issues with the practices used there. Generalising broadly, a major motivator of good performance is the shame attached to poor performance. Families spend enormous amounts of money on cram schools, and children spend enormous time and energy in these schools. Surely these are not the practices that we would like to import into other countries.

Empowering Teachers
Pedagogic innovation is led by teachers and schools. However, in this era of accountability and audit, of which ILSAs are a part, there is great pressure on teachers to conform and little incentive to experiment. Although countries like Finland provide a model for employing highly qualified teachers and then trusting their professionalism and allowing them to teach with minimal surveillance, this is not the model that has been taken up globally. Rather, teacher accountability has been ratcheted up with impossible measurements such as what value individual teachers add to a student’s performance (Value Added Measures). There is a paradoxical valuing of teachers as the single biggest in-school influence on student performance, whilst at the same time assuming that they must be constantly monitored and that, unless they are held accountable and incentivised in various ways, they would tend not to do their best. In most countries, teachers are not included – or are included in tokenistic ways – in policy discussions and reform plans.

Although this kind of climate is not a direct result of global metrics, it is certainly one to which they have contributed. Every country wants to be in the top five in international rankings, as if that were a prize in itself (Gorur & Wu, 2015). Many countries have introduced national assessments and present the results in comparative formats which makes student performance (often linked to teacher performance) ‘high stakes’. This is not the kind of ethos that supports, let alone encourages, innovation.

References