Can global learning metrics be culturally responsive?

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One of the most popular myths of the 21st century is that school can transform your life. No matter your socio-economic status, your resident status in a country, your private role as a parent or an employer, or your participation in global policy forums, there is often an unquestioning belief in the power of schools and the role of education in peoples’ lives. Moving towards a focus on learning from simply accessing education has been welcome shift, as evidence in recent decades shows that enrollment, access and physical presence in school do not simply promote learning. But while taskforces, researchers, policy makers and popular media promote the greater visibility of learning as an end result, critical voices are starting to ask more loudly “Learning towards what end?”

In the description of this session, the program asks whether the “concept of global learning metrics is based on the assumption that there is an agreement about what constitutes “good” and “quality” education worldwide” while also accepting the fact that these metrics have often “neglected the diversity of cultural contexts and educational systems.” The program also asks whether there is a global “core of fundamental knowledge, skills and competencies that are relevant across different countries?” and if metrics can “capture the dynamics” of the intersectionality of student identity while also being more culturally responsive in light of the irrefutable fact that there are uneven power relations around the world.

The simple answer to those questions might be “No – global learning metrics cannot be culturally responsive in light global inequities and the dynamics of difference”. Such an answer then would ignore the critical importance of ensuring school is a successful place for students, and that learning across multiple domains ought to occur (Learning Metrics Taskforce, 2013). While the symposium might not focus on defining what a “good”, “quality” and “successful” education might mean, I do approach this conversation from the perspective that there is such a thing as a good education, but that the terms are relative, contextual and inequitable in delivery and outcomes. The larger argument I am making centers on two issues surrounding measuring learning. The marginalization of these two areas in the conversation are relevant to why global learning metrics might flounder in light of equity and responsiveness.

The first centers on how the choice of what, how, when and where to learn is driven by a single global ideology which by its sheer force and influence is incapable of providing space for any sort of culturally responsive measurement of true global diversity and agency. The influence of a neoliberal ideology continues to ensure that the expectations and outcomes of education remain central to the needs of the workplace. Even spaces that previously were immune or resisted the push of neoliberal ideologies are struggling (see Pearlstein, 2016). The greater focus on the knowledge economy and the ensuring efficiency of educational markets make it more challenging to address the needs of those on the margins of equity in education (Rizvi & Engel, 2009).
The intersection of colonialism, patriarchy and neoliberalism has created metropoles (Connell, 2010) that promote the ideas of equitable systems and structures while maintain the structure and systems of oppression. Connell (2010) argues that school systems “were constructed in the colonies at much the same time as they were being developed in the metropole” and while “the periphery becomes a source of data, and a site of application...the concentration of data and the moment of theorising occurs in the metropole...Therefore intellectuals living in the periphery are strongly oriented to the metropole.” (p. 608). So while the exercise of developing equitable learning metrics and ensuring the views of a wide variety of stakeholders are embedded in the outcomes and opportunities, the metrics to be followed are often viewed or adapted through the lens of what we are already conditioned to see.

The second issue focuses on the role of teacher education and the preparation of teachers in the measurement of learning especially across increasingly diverse student bodies. The Taskforce on Global Learning Metrics suggests that “globally tracked indicators should be aligned with what is measured nationally and in schools or classrooms, while measurement at the national level should be aligned with the competencies measured in classrooms or schools” (p. 3). The report suggests that teachers ought to be the first line of measurement but that such evaluation is often summative and administered in the form of final exams (LMTF, 2013). Student achievement is linked to culturally responsive teaching (Liebtag, 2016) but yet, culturally responsive teaching itself is not as widespread and few teacher education programs excel with such types of courses in their teacher preparation programs. Teacher assessment and analysis of student learning “needs to vary, in relation to the learners, the context and the subject matter knowledge” (Richert, Donahue & LaBoskey, 2009, p. 648). Without a focus on ensuring culturally relevant pedagogy that takes into account all forms of knowledge in a community, it seems impossible for learning to be measured at the point of instruction in a culturally responsive manner.

If we decide that learning metrics are desirable, feasible and pedagogically innovative, we have to ask if they are culturally responsive. Issues of culture are integrally linked to power. As long as the ideology of education is buttressed by a neoliberal stance, and teachers are judged by the assessments they have to scale, the ability for metrics to be culturally responsive seems to be aligned to rhetoric than practice.

References