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Learner-centred pedagogy: Towards a post-2015 agenda for teaching and learning

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A B S T R A C T

Pedagogy continues to be a neglected priority in discussions on the post-2015 agenda for education. The article situates pedagogy generally and learner-centred pedagogy specifically within these current debates. The potential of learner-centred education (LCE) is considered in the light of the evidence of its promise also taking into consideration the historic record of implementation challenges where LCE has been part of a policy framework for improving the quality of education. The concept of a pedagogical nexus illustrates how different parts of a system work together, how actors shape this and are influenced by it, and the implications of this for pedagogical change. The article therefore also explores how global goals and targets and their monitoring interact with other parts of the system and may affect teaching and learning in unintended ways. It argues for a revised conception of learner-centred pedagogy as an enabling goal, upon which other goals and targets depend.

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1. Introduction

In the current consultations and debates about the spirit and content of the post-2015 agenda, factions of the education and development community are lobbying for extension of the MDG legacy. One set of challenges comes from those of us who would secure space for pedagogy in the agenda, and who would nuance the debate about learning and about quality in education with greater attention to classroom processes. Quality is embedded in the proposals put forward by many agencies, and there is reference to pedagogy as a process within this (see for example, Global Campaign for Education, 2012; UNESCO, 2013; Education International, n.d.) but there is little detail of what this looks like in the classroom and a pre-occupation with measurable inputs and outcomes continues to prevail. Alexander's (2014) analysis of the neglect of pedagogy, the defining of quality, and the problem of measurement broaches this subject thoughtfully. In this article, I extend this discussion by focusing in particular on learner-centred forms of pedagogy. Learner-centred pedagogy as a policy discourse has been a globally-travelling prescription for improvements to teaching and learning, even a 'panacea' (Sriprikash, 2010), but it has been fraught with problems of definition, inappropriate transfer, and implementation challenges (Schweisfurth, 2013). It therefore demands ongoing consideration in its conceptualisation

and ameliorative potential, not least in the context of the post-2015 debate on education in low-income countries.

In order to put the discussion in context, the article firstly situates pedagogy generally, and learner-centred pedagogical approaches specifically within the wider landscape of the post-MDG discussion, including the obsessions, silences and confusions which characterise the debate. Based on a reconceptualisation of learner-centred education (LCE), it then explores the potential for LCE to engage with different goals and contexts, offering reflections on how well this proposed version of LCE fits into the emerging agenda for post-2015. It also considers the challenges it poses to the prevailing discourses of goals, measures and metrics.

The paper adopts and ultimately argues for a perspective on teaching and learning which acknowledges the multiple interactions within and beyond the classroom which shape experiences, individual identities, and social worlds. Teaching and learning are deeply embedded in the cultural, resource, institutional and policy contexts in which they take place. Classroom interactions are at the heart of pedagogy, and any effort to improve or to evaluate the outcomes of these processes generates its own sets of interactions, and shapes the priorities and identities of teachers and learners. The paper is therefore concerned with the actions, reactions and adaptations that take place in classrooms, and also how outside interventions interact with and shape what happens in processes of teaching and learning. Such interventions may take the form of imposed visions of good pedagogy, but equally monitoring of progress towards global goals takes on an interventionist character

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in the light of interactions with classroom practice. In these ways, the analysis in this article is set within a broadly interactionist sociological tradition (Atkinson and Housley, 2003), seeing the actors and institutions involved as 'role making' as well as 'role taking' (Garfinkel, 1967).[1] This sets it apart from much of the emerging post-2015 discussion which ascribes fixed roles for teachers and learners and which imagines that learning goals, testing and measurement are outside of these in an omniscient guiding and monitoring capacity. Given all of this, the paper addresses the questions: what vision of pedagogy is suited to the post-2015 agenda? What kind of goals or targets would be appropriate, and what kind of monitoring? Building on Hufton and Elliott's (2000) concept of a 'pedagogical nexus', the article constructs an appeal for attention to the interface of these different aspects of the education system, for a fuller engagement with the most promising aspects of LCE, and for greater understanding of how goals and measures can impact on pedagogy in unintended ways.

2. Pedagogy and the post-2015 debate: obsessions, silences and confusions

With approximately 157 million children of school age not in school at the turn of the millennium, access to basic education was the pre-occupation of the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) agenda, With hard-to-reach groups still not accessing school, and access inequitably distributed, we are not quite yet in a post-access world. The broadened post-2015 agenda as it is currently emerging still rightfully addresses access to primary education, specifically for learners from disadvantaged groups. However, access to higher levels, especially junior secondary school, is a growing priority, not least because of the demands for education created by new cohorts of primary school graduates.

So too are quality and outcomes, underpinned by the startling statistic that 250 million children in schools are not learning basic literacy and numeracy skills (UNESCO, 2014). Access PLUS learning is how the Learning Metrics Task Force summarised these new priorities (UNESCO-UIS/Brookings, 2013). The quality imperative[2] is particularly relevant for a discussion of pedagogy. However, as Alexander (2008a, 2014) notes, quality education is often addressed obliquely and couched in terms of its outcomes rather than its processes. For example, summarising wide consultations regarding quality, a UNESCO report notes that: 'good-quality education was defined as equipping people with the skills, knowledge and attitudes to: obtain decent work; live together as active citizens nationally and globally; understand and prepare for a world in which environmental degradation and climate change present a threat to sustainable living and livelihoods; and understand their rights' (UNESCO, 2013: 22). In other words, quality education is constructed in terms of the outcomes it delivers. The same document summarises the inputs of a range of influential stakeholders contributing to the post-2015 debate, including Save the Children, the Basic Education Coalition, and the UNESCO Education for All Global Monitoring Report, each of which put measurable learning outcomes under the umbrella of quality

(p. 29). Key documents from The Global Campaign for Education (2012) and Education International (n.d.) do the same. This conflation of quality with outcomes has had unintended consequences, in the forms of obsessions with measurement and measurability; silences on teaching and learning processes; and confusions over what good teaching and learning are and how they can be promoted and evaluated.

Within the emerging 2015 agenda, the concern for monitoring of progress and therefore for measurability has resulted in a focus on the measurable. This is not surprising. The international community, and national governments, want to know whether the focused investment on education has led to improvements, and which investments offer the best returns, and those concerned with numbers in terms of financial investment are likely to be concerned with numbers for informing policy generally. So, for example, while the Learning Metrics Task Force has opened the outcomes agenda to less conventional and more holistic goals, including physical, social and emotional well-being, culture and the arts, the focus remains on indicators, measurement and metrics.

It is not necessarily measurement and metrics per se that are problematic. It is how these in interaction with the classroom level become ends in themselves and creating unintended backwash effects. Their perceived importance also tends to relegate that which is not readily measurable to a secondary place on the agenda. There are multiple international examples of such phenomena. PISA, for example, has generated game playing and helped governments to fabricate crises (or 'scandalise' as per Steiner-Khamsi, 2003) in the OECD countries where it currently operates. As a test it generates interesting data of potential importance to governments and to researchers, in terms of understanding certain kinds of progress in terms of attainment, and also in terms of inequalities within countries. But those data have the power to distort the policy process and impact on practice in ways which do not necessarily promote quality processes or outcomes. The Welsh government, for example, has asked schools to teach to the PISA test in order to raise the standing of Wales in the global league tables of PISA performance (*Times Education Supplement* 9 March 2012; http://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?-storycode=6191814) without evidence that preparing for this test increases achievement in relation to valuable learning outcomes (unless one considers doing well on PISA a valuable learning outcome). National pride and political concerns arguably fuel the drive for success as much as improvements to learning, and the proxy for learning becomes the goal rather than the learning itself. Given the current obsession with metrics, it is perhaps unsurprising that PISA is on the agenda for low-income countries, with PISA for Development aiming to 'increase developing countries' use of PISA assessments for monitoring progress towards nationally-set targets for improvement' (http://www.oecd.org/pisa/aboutpisa/pisafordevelopment.htm). Low-income countries would be subject to all the pressures that OECD governments experience in terms of global rankings, but the possibility s of aid agencies exerting additional performance pressures could only confound the effects.

As well as creating such backwash effects, comparisons of international test results across different contexts are potentially problematic in terms of validity. Evidence and theory from psychology point to cultural differences in how assessment is regarded and what is valued in learning (Sternberg, 2007) calling into question the comparability of results from testing in different contexts where different aspects of learning and assessment are valued differently at an intrinsic level. Learners in some contexts will be more motivated to perform on certain tests or test items than others. Ethnographic studies of the administration of international tests of literacy achievement in local circumstances reveal an additional range of confounding variables created by

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[1] After Atkinson and Housley (2003), I use the term 'broadly interactionist'. A large number of traditions exist within interactionism, including the more narrow symbolic interactionism, but they share a common concern for the agency of actors, their situation, how meaning and identity are constructed, and how social actors and social institutions (including schools) are interactively defined. This is in opposition to functionalism, which ascribes fixed roles and a more static and therefore more manipulable and measurable social order.

[2] Quality is a contested concept in itself. Given my concern for a wide range of outcomes and with processes which have learners' rights and their interests at heart, I prefer Tikly and Barrett's (2011) framework which embraces social justice and learner capabilities within it.