



# Quality education through performativity. 'Learning crisis' and technology of quantification in Tanzania



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## ABSTRACT

Concerns over effective learning have been central to the post-2015 debates. This renewed emphasis on quality has prompted a search for international standardised definitions and measures of learning. Performativity – the production of performance through measurement devices, borrowed from the private sector, that induce new individual conducts and institutional organisations – is likely to constitute a prominent feature of the post-2015 education aid landscape. In Tanzania, that has been facing a learning crisis since the end of the 2000s, technologies of quantification have been deployed by aid agencies (within the budget support framework) and a local NGO, Twaweza (Uwezo studies, cash-on-delivery, performance-based teachers' salary and school funding, randomised-controlled trials) to address poor learning performances. This paper provides a critical analysis of this new public management technology and argues that they represent groundwork for a further stage in neoliberal education more certainly than for the promotion of a transformative education.

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## 1. Introduction

After the enrolment improvements achieved within the Education for All-Millennium Development Goals (EFA-MDGs) framework, the post-2015 debates on education have largely been driven by concerns over effective learning. This renewed global interest for quality has gone hand in hand with a quest for internationally standardised measures of learning. In 2013, the OECD launched its 'PISA for Development' initiative aimed at extending standardised assessments of learning achievements to developing countries.<sup>1</sup> Another global initiative – the Learning Metrics Task Force, implemented by Brookings Institution and UNESCO Institute of Statistics – intends to forge a global consensus around 'what learning is important globally?' and 'how it should be measured'.<sup>2</sup> Assigning a higher priority to quality constitutes without doubt a valuable departure from the focus on access during the EFA-MDGs period. Nevertheless, monitoring a global learning goal through internationally standardised tests with quantitative targets focused on

measurable basic skills may also jeopardise the very possibility of fulfilling the goal (Barrett, 2011).

Tanzania, which has often been a forerunner for aid innovations, provides an interesting case study to explore the significance, for development assistance in education, of the 'quality shift' and its related concerns over measurement. Current aid dynamics in the Tanzanian education sector may well prefigure key dimensions of the post-2015 global educational aid landscape. While during the 2000 decade donors-government policy dialogue was mainly focused on access, today 'everybody is saying the word "quality"' (Interview, education aid manager, Dar es Salaam, 18/11/2011). To take account of growing concerns over quality, aid interventions in education have evolved. Since 2006–2007, education aid relations have been largely shaped by instruments designed to manage the general budget support (GBS) aid modality. Recently 'quality' has been integrated within the existing GBS instruments. But new forms of policy interventions have also been piloted by Twaweza, an East African NGO, with donor support: the Uwezo studies (the assessment of children's literacy and numeracy performances across East Africa) but also performance-based teachers' salary and school funding (cash-on-delivery) coupled with randomised impact evaluations. This paper argues that the 'quality crisis' and this technology of quantification are not opening up opportunities for the promotion of a transformative education. They rather represent a new stage in the advancement of the education neoliberal regime in Tanzania.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisaforddevelopment/>.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.brookings.edu/about/centers/universal-education/learning-metrics-task-force/about>.

The paper does not explore other key dimensions of aid agencies' responses to the 'learning crisis': i.e. framing quality in utilitarian terms ('science/math/language/skills'); the provision of textbooks or science infrastructures and supplies; teachers' training in science and language and a sector dialogue on 'quality' budget expenditures.

This paper is based on semi-structured interviews conducted in Tanzania in 2011–2012 in the context of a PhD fieldwork focused on the expansion of secondary education. Performance-based management in education constituted one of the topics explored by the research project. The sampling of informants rested on a combination of two non-probabilistic sampling techniques. Through 'purposive sampling' interviewees were identified by their position, their reputation or their knowledge on the object of research (Kidder et al., 1991). Supplementary interviews were selected following a 'snowball sampling method', on the basis of names suggested by the first set of respondents (Tansey, 2007). The paper uses specific data collected during interviews of fifteen officials in the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training (MoEVT), six in the Prime Minister's Office for Regional Administration and Local Government (PMO-RALG), eight in the Ministry of Finance, seventeen education aid managers and economists in donor agencies and four civil society representatives. The paper is also informed by the analysis of official documents and the press, internet investigations and the author's former experience as an aid practitioner. Between 2005 and 2008 indeed, the author was a programme officer at the EU Delegation to Tanzania and in 2007 she led the Education Development Partners Group: during that period, the author was very much enmeshed within the power relations that characterise Tanzania's education aid arena. This specific position called for a careful exercise of constant reflexivity and a permanent questioning of the ways by which the former active participation in the research site could influence informants' answers. Systematic triangulation of data and tracing discursive patterns outside the circle of previously known informants proved a fecund way to circumvent interpretative challenges (for a discussion of similar positionality challenges see for instance Mosse, 2006).

The first section provides theoretical elements on the technology of quantification in education and specifies the nature of the 'learning crisis' experienced by Tanzania. The second section shows how the integration of 'quality education' within the general budget support framework in Tanzania has meant its subjection to a 'management by numbers'. The last section demonstrates how Twaweza's initiatives geared towards learning improvements may be understood as a project to ground Tanzanian public schools within the performative logics of the market.

## 2. Technology of quantification in education: global context, elements of theory and the Tanzanian 'learning crisis'

This paper draws on a literature dedicated to the sociology of quantification that looks at the production of numbers and their political and social use. Porter (1995) studies the growing appeal of quantification in social sciences and shows how the objectivity of numbers is historically constructed. Desrosières (1998, 2008) emphasises the dual nature of quantitative tools, which are, at the same time, instruments of evidence and of government. He introduces the distinction between two verbs 'to measure' and 'to quantify'. The former implies that something already exists in a form that can be measured through a realistic metrology, such as a physical quantity. According to him, the pervasive use in social sciences of the term 'to measure' tends to obscure the conventions of quantification that underpin calculations. He challenges the myth of statistics and other quantification technology, such as performance indicators or benchmarking, as neutral devices that

would provide impartial and irrefutable evidence. In a similar way, Jerven (2013) highlights the political significance of African social and economic statistics, 'mostly produced for the consumption of the development community' (Jerven, 2013, p. 105), 'malleable' outcomes of a negotiation process rather than outputs of a technical exercise. Lingard (2014, p. 32), who studies the politics of numbers in the education field, points out the 'power of the single figure and its "black boxing" effects, the obscuring of the technical work involved in the production of objectivity'.

The present critique of the technology of quantification in education should not be understood as a denial of the heuristic value of statistics in social sciences or their potential role in supporting progressive public policies. In the past, sophisticated quantitative analyses critically underpinned constructivist educational research that demonstrated the role of education in the reproduction and legitimation of social inequalities (Lingard, 2014, p. 28). According to Porter (1995) and Desrosières (2008) statistics, during the welfare state period, were largely perceived as instruments that the subaltern could use to denounce inequalities and privileges and challenge unjust policies. At the international level, UNESCO, since its inception, has produced comparable statistics to help its member states to plan their national education programmes (Cussó and D'Amico, 2005). However, the rise of the neoliberal state has driven a fundamental reformulation of the role of the educational statistical apparatus.

Following Harrison, neoliberalism can be defined as an encompassing project of social engineering. It is a 'project to expand and universalise free-market social relations' that 'affects not only the economic sphere but also the state, the state's relations with society, and society itself' (Harrison, 2010, p. 32). Specifically in education, the neoliberal policy agenda has had two main strategic orientations: parents' choice/privatisation and the reengineering of state education systems along managerial rules borrowed from the private sector (Ball, 2012). To become efficient and deliver 'learning', education bureaucracies and public schools need to be run with entrepreneurial methods. New institutionalism, entangled with human capital theory, provides the theoretical backbone for this reform programme geared towards a market-friendly reshuffle of education institutions (see for instance Hanushek, 1995; Pritchett and Filmer, 1999; Hanushek and Woessmann, 2008; Beatty and Pritchett, 2012). Three institutional features are supposed to induce significant improvements in the efficiency of education systems: 'choice and competition'; 'decentralisation and autonomy of schools'; and 'accountability'. High spending on teachers' salary is identified as the greatest source of inefficiency in education systems; 'rent-seeking behaviours' of bureaucrats, teachers and their unions are singled out as impediments to institutional reforms geared towards learning improvements. One explicit goal assigned to educational institutional reforms is to 'discipline' teachers and their unions, to radically alter the structure of their incentives (Hanushek and Woessmann, 2008; Pritchett and Filmer, 1999). Setting up outcome-oriented institutions, including performance-based teachers' pay, should also become education policy-makers' major objective (Bruno et al., 2011; World Bank, 2010).

Performance-based management, benchmarking, evaluation, randomised-controlled trials (RCT) and other measurement devices can be considered as emblematic technologies of the neoliberal project and critical engines of the international educational policy reform agenda. Between the 1960s and the 1980s, international education statistics were mainly used to support educational policy making and assessment, in relation to nationally defined objectives. Since the 1990s, international statistics have increasingly fulfilled a much more normative function and contributed to the diffusion of standardised policies (Cussó, 2006). International surveys of students' learning

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