

Goldilocks revisited: measuring education quality within the post-2015 global framework

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Introduction

How not to provide too much information, or too little; how neither to be too universal, nor too specific; how to drive efforts to reach the goal without getting lost in the woods? In all these and other areas, measurement, like Goldilocks's porridge in the fairytale, has to be just right.

The privileging of learning outcomes in the discussion about education quality denotes a shift in discourse that prompts three essential criticisms: one, it leads to a narrow conception of quality that is reflected only in partial measures, typically mathematics and numeracy;¹ two, it confines the discussion on quality to a discussion on outcomes, neglecting the process of teaching and learning² and the essential inputs for assuring quality;³ and three, it dislocates quality from equity.⁴ Any measures ultimately adopted for the global education goal will have consequences all of their own, intended as well as unintended, and need to be discussed on their own merits.

In this 'new' discourse, education is a process, and learning is an outcome, and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Education for All (EFA) goals focus on education 'access', which has improved, whereas 'quality' has not. A causal relationship is implied but not explained. The emphasis on outcomes is presented as an effort to redress the under-emphasis on quality; echoing the position of the World Bank, evident in both the 2020 Education Strategy (2011) and the Systems Approach for Better Education Results (SABER), which advances a framework for driving systems-wide reforms in education through a focus on learning outcomes.

Improving quality: are indicators for literacy, numeracy and 'life skills for work' enough?

The idea of a Millennium Learning Goal was first put forward as early as 2007,⁵ advancing the global monitoring of learning outcomes to benchmark progress in education.⁶ The High Level Panel's (HLP) recommendations identify reading, writing and counting, as well as life skills for work, as the key indicators for quality in the global education development agenda, placing the measurement of quality centrally in the current debate.

Education International's (EI) analysis of the HLP report⁷ points out that while the text and the proposed goal – to provide quality education and lifelong learning – are consistent with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights' (UDHR)⁸ commitment to the 'full development of the human personality', this is not served by the proposed targets. The targets are necessary but not sufficient for giving young people a chance to realise their full potential. Other commentators point to

how the broad conception of the right to education in the UDHR of 1948 – particularly that it should also be free and compulsory – has narrowed successively in global commitments.⁹

It's questionable whether a stick-thin global education agenda for little more than literacy, numeracy, counting and life skills for work would satisfy even a purely human capital approach (i.e. one that does not seek to address human development beyond its economic ramifications¹⁰). It does not satisfy a rights-based approach,¹¹ which identifies three types of benefits, or capabilities, that education should provide:¹²

1. **Instrumental benefits**, which involve the ability to utilise skills to participate in the economy
2. **Intrinsic benefits**, which involve the cultural, social and personal abilities that add value to life regardless of employment status
3. **Positional benefits** that confer the respect that enables the redress of race, gender and class inequality¹³

Instrumental hard skills may be easier to quantify, grade and compare, and thus appear to be more convenient to measure for a global goal; they will remain partial and potentially misleading indicators for education quality.

Box 1

Management by objectives

The idea of 'management by objectives' (MBO)¹⁴ has fundamentally shaped management in the past half century. The MBO approach was developed for business but is now common in the public sector and management generally; it underpins the assumption that society, like organisations, can be managed.¹⁵ The dictum that sums up this approach, 'what gets measured, gets managed', undergirds the formulation of the current MDGs and is captured in the broad-goals-and-specific-targets binary conception of the post-2015 framework. The Learning Metrics Task Force (LMTF) sets three questions to frame its three reports, the last of which is due in November 2013:

- What learning is important for children and youth?
- How should learning outcomes be measured?
- How can the measurement of learning outcomes improve education quality?

Each is a crucial question for education but understands objectives only in terms of learning outcomes.

A glance at selected established frameworks for quality education¹⁶ reveals that measuring quality involves a mix of indicators for different 'dimensions' of education: resources and materials; classroom practice; content; pedagogy; and learning outcomes. These are referred to succinctly as education inputs, processes and outcomes.¹⁷ For education practitioners, quality in the classroom involves numerous preconditions for learning, not all of which may be readily translatable into quantifiable measures in the parametric sense.¹⁸ The Campaign for Norms and Standards by the membership-based students' organisation in South Africa, Equal Education, illustrates the importance learners ascribe to adequate resources, signifying the value of inputs in grassroots struggles for quality and the right to education. Such movements suggest that if we wish to measure accountably, we should measure what we treasure, not the other way round.

Quality and equity in education – separate discussions?

The LMFT reports explain that the 'objective of the project is to catalyse a shift in the global conversation on education from a focus on access to access plus learning'.¹⁹ This implies a separation where none may be intended, but significantly missing in this formula is that the shift needs to be from access only (if this was ever fully accurate) to 'access plus quality *and* equity'. The LMFT proposes that measures should enable the identification of equity gaps and pay attention to disparities in outcomes, and that these should be determined at national level.

However, the treatment of quality and equity, or more specifically, learning and equity, is not equal in the LMFT; this raises a question for those who see equity as inseparable from quality or consider the provision of quality education as a key measure of social justice. But what makes it true that quality and equity are indivisible beyond the assertion that this is so? Equity is inconceivable without addressing quality, but it can't be said that the reciprocal is true. The opposite, in fact, is more frequently the case: quality is addressed without equity all the time, which is precisely why policy should emphasise the indivisibility of quality and equity.

The recommendations of the Commonwealth Ministerial Working Group²⁰ propose that access, quality and equity should be carried through in all the goals, and puts forward targets to 'reduce and seek to eliminate differences in educational outcomes [emphasis added] among learners associated with household wealth, gender, special needs, location, age and social group'. It makes sense that such targets would be set at a national level, although the implied indicator – i.e. the rate of narrowing the *differences in educational outcomes* – offers a universal target for developed and developing countries alike that combines quality and equity.

Who benefits from the extension of quality monitoring beyond national boundaries?

Given the growth and influence of international standards and comparative testing over the past two decades, two questions present themselves:

1. What is the evidence that the global thirst for comparative data on learning outcomes leads to improvements in education quality?

2. Who benefits from monitoring quality beyond national borders, or indeed from monitoring quality at all?

On the surface, there would seem to be some consensus that learning standards contribute usefully to improving policy. Yet, as equity and quality are interlinked in classroom practice as in public policy, it is not always certain that the external monitoring of quality has the desired effects on improving practice. External standards can be politicised, intrusive and frequently problematic in that they animate technical and bureaucratic solutions in order to improve standards,²¹ instead of enabling teachers and schools with the support they need to achieve quality in the process of learning. If the point of monitoring quality is to achieve improvements in quality teaching and learning, monitoring quality should provide the analysis for improvements in practice.

For educators, the reality of external standards is mostly teaching to the test; the conflation of a standardised form of required knowledge with the real substance of quality in education. It is too soon to shut the door on other ways of monitoring quality in the classroom and rely completely on learning outcome measures. As measuring the process of learning appears to be a lot more difficult, and perhaps thankfully more elusive to capture in standardised tests, than measuring learning outcomes – i.e. the post-facto result – it could be useful to identify indicators that best help describe quality in teaching and learning.

Box 2

International comparative studies – how much do they tell us?

Comparative international education statistics have come a long way since the International Bureau of Education started providing broadly comparative annual education information in 1926 and the social reporting movement of the 1960s gave impetus to social indicators and the early International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) studies.

The international comparative assessment studies of the 1990s, which emerged after the Jomtien Conference on Education For All in 1990, included, among others, the IEA Reading Literacy Study, PASEC and SACMEC, the OECD's TIMSS, and PIRLS. All have helped to focus policy attention more closely on quality in education systems, albeit mostly through the proxy lens of mathematics and reading.

PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), which was first published in 2000, broadened this focus more to look at mathematics, science, reading and readiness for life. After the World Education Forum in 2000 in Dakar, the Global Monitoring Reports on EFA, as well as citizen's initiatives to own information such as ASER and UWEZO, have continued to show the potential of information to drive and shape policy. These studies focus mostly on more measurable cognitive skills, apart from ICCS and aspects of EDI and PISA.

Non-cognitive skills are starting to attract attention, and new thinking in economics has begun to recognise the importance of the non-cognitive dimensions of education as well as its intrinsic and positional benefits for human flourishing, social well-being and economic development.

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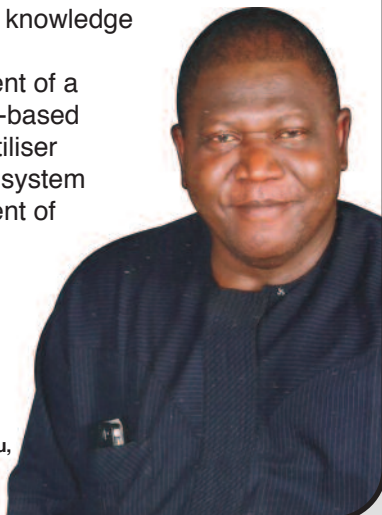
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The reconfiguration of public services within neo-liberal globalisation has placed education squarely in the headlamps of the private sector; this should not be overlooked when asking who benefits from monitoring education quality. For business, the education sector in APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) countries, for example, represents a market worth a relatively stable US\$1,600 billion within a wider volatile global market. The world's largest education multinational and largest testing company within this 'industry', Pearson, made an income of \$7 billion in 2011; the top 20 education multinationals are worth a combined \$36 billion – only a foot in the door to the larger market and anticipating vigorous growth. Private sector investors and companies share a seat with philanthropic foundations on the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) board and are increasingly vocal in the global policy agenda for education. The three co-chairs of the LMTF are representatives from UNICEF, Pratham and Pearson; they will need to declare their interests as plans for credible and accountable measurement of the education goal take shape.

The abiding questions with respect to global monitoring relate to who owns the information, who benefits from it and how can it advance the right to education for all learners. Unless measurement is meaningful for the measured, indicators for the global education goal will be indicators for aid conditionality, little more.

Strategic considerations for managing measurement within the global framework

While the global goals framework has had a significant effect on the education sector, the EFA goals have had a more direct influence on policy and education delivery: quite significantly through the GPE, formerly the Education for All - Fast Track Initiative (EFA-FTI), which has provided developing countries with much-needed financial assistance for meeting their targets; the Global Campaign for Education (GCE),²² which, particularly through its stronger affiliates, has been quite effective in mobilising civil society in support of the goals; and through the World Bank's Global Monitoring Report (GMR), which has set an important benchmark for quality in its monitoring of progress towards the goals based on the EFA framework. What happens to the EFA movement is perhaps the most significant discussion to be had in relation to the global education goal in the post-2015 framework. It has been an oddly absent discussion.

The position advanced by EI and the GCE, reflecting what their constituencies want, is that there should be an EFA 3 as well as a global goal in the post-2015 framework. An important set of strategic questions logically follows: What should be covered in the global goal? How should EFA 3 differ from the current formulation of EFA goals? How can an effective strategy for convincing the international donor community to support a continuation of EFA be built?

The set of strategic questions that follow from the position that there should be a single unified framework under the global goals include: How can we secure a balanced, comprehensive education agenda within the global goals framework? How can we ensure

that the key questions relating to education, or learning, are adequately addressed within a framework that is ultimately to be decided by non-educationists?

Real consequences for the way the education sector is organised at a global level are attendant on the position that prevails and the answers to these questions. From the point of view of measurement, the question is: What is the fate of the GMR post-2015 without a commitment to EFA? The GMR plans two years ahead, so without a clear indication of continued support relatively soon, the capacity to produce a report post-2015 stands to be compromised. This would be a huge loss for the education sector. Is the LMTE positioning itself to take on the GMR mantle? How does the GPE position and transform itself from being the principal supporter of EFA; is it already doing so? What could be the outcome of the UNESCO Seoul meeting in 2015? Will there be a resurgence of an EFA movement that is not in hock to the whims of international agencies? The Commonwealth could be a crucial voice in this debate.

Postscript: Goldilocks revisited

In the original fairytale, the three bears were all male and Goldilocks was a vixen, a female fox. In later tellings of the tale, the vixen became a rather cantankerous and ugly old lady who broke into houses and showed little respect for private property. This was a moral tale about breaking and entry. This interpretation, presumably, did not work that well for children, or parents, as the story that has survived involves a little girl, Goldilocks, and a conventional heterosexual family of bears (instead of three male bears in an unspecified cohabiting relationship). The meaning of this version of the fairytale seems to be that it is okay to take advantage of strangers if one is lost in the woods.

In this respect, Goldilocks is a parable for measurement in the Post-2015 Framework for a global education goal: it teaches us not to lose the meaning of education and make measurement an end in itself. We can look forward to assessing the learning outcomes in a few years.

Endnotes

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- 8 The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948. For recent resolutions seeking to shore up this commitment, see: HRC/RES/20/7 Section 3b & HRC/RES/23/4 Section 3.
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- 13 Brighouse, H. and Unterhalter, E. (2008), *Primary Goods versus Capabilities: Considering the debate in relation to equalities in education*. In Hans-Uwe Otto and Holgar Ziegler (Eds.), *Capabilities - Handlungsbefähigung und Verwirklichungschancen in der Erziehungswissenschaft. Der Capabilities Ansatz als neue Orientierung in der Erziehungswissenschaft*, Wiesbaden: VS-Verlag (2008), pp. 69–84.
- 14 The term 'management by objectives', or MBO, was first popularised by Peter Drucker in his seminal 1954 book, *The Practice of Management*.
- 15 Kamens, D. and McNeely, C. (2010), 'Globalization and the Growth of International Testing and National Assessment'. *Comparative Education Review*, 54(1), pp. 5–25.
- 16 See, for example: 1) OECD (1995), *Measuring the Quality of Schools*. Paris: OECD; 2) European Commission (2000), *Sixteen Quality Indicators: European report on quality of school education*. Brussels: European Commission Directorate-General for Education and Culture; 3) National Council of Educational Research and Training (2003), *Indicators of Quality Education at the Elementary Stage*. Delhi: NCERT. 4) UNESCO (2007), *Education For All Development Index (EDI)*. Available online: at <http://portal.unesco.org/education>.
- 17 In a background paper for the 2008 Global Monitoring Report, Barrett et al. review over 120 initiatives to improve quality dealing with inputs, processes and outcomes. Barrett, A. M., Ali, S., Clegg, J., Hinostroza, E., Lowe, J., Nikel, J., Novelli, M., Oduro, G., Pillay, M., Tikly L. and Yu, G. (2008), *Initiatives to Improve the Quality of Teaching and Learning: A review of recent literature*. Paris: Global Monitoring Report.
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- 19 Summary Report: Toward Universal Learning: Recommendations from the Learning Metrics Task Force
- 20 Recommendations of the Commonwealth Ministerial Working Group on the Post-2015 Development Framework for Education.
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- 22 Global Campaign for Education, maintain consistent advocacy pressure from civil society in support of reaching the targets under the global goals.

HUGH MCLEAN is the director of the Open Society Foundations (OSF) Education Support Program. He started his career as a teacher in a remote resettlement village in one of South Africa's apartheid homelands in the early 1980s where he established an education initiative with local youth. After this was closed by the authorities, he worked in adult literacy and trade union education in Johannesburg. Following the unbanning of the ANC, he worked in corporate philanthropy. McLean set up the first professional association of Southern African grantmakers; he left South Africa in 1999 to work for OSF in Hungary, where the programme was focused primarily on supporting countries undergoing post-communist transitions. OSF's education programmes now focus on supporting social movements and professional networks to affirm education as a public good and promote the right to education globally.