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

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ABSTRACT

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’ (Sripriakash, 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.
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 Hutton 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 imperative2 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 is 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 Tilly and Barrett’s (2011) framework which embraces social justice and learner capabilities within it.
interactions with local understandings of learning, testing, and valuable knowledge (e.g. Maddox, 2014). Differing levels of extrinsic motivation in performing the task also figure; in Scotland, for example, a pre-PISA video was shown to students called ‘Scotland Expect’ http://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?story-code=6379167 precisely to affect the motivation of students to exert themselves on a test that is otherwise not useful on an individual level.

Perhaps because its subtleties do not readily lend themselves to universalised indicators and quantified judgement (no matter how flawed these may be) pedagogy has not occupied a clear place on the MDG agenda nor yet in discussions going forward beyond 2015. Alexander’s definition of pedagogy is apposite and reflects this article’s concern with the interaction of the act of teaching and the internal and external forces governing it:

Pedagogy, then, encompasses both the act of teaching and its contingent theories and debates. Pedagogy is the discourse with which one needs to engage in order both to teach intelligently and make sense of teaching – for discourse and act are interdependent, and there can be no teaching without pedagogy or pedagogy without teaching (Alexander, 2009: 510).

As Alexander (2014) also notes, given the complexities of those interactions, pedagogy is a ‘deep well’, and it may be those deep waters that encourage organisations concerned with global governance to keep a distance. However, silence about pedagogy among agenda-setters in the post-2015 discussions does not mean that silence prevails. There is, in fact, a lot of noise, and confusion. Pedagogy happens wherever teachers are teaching, and something is governing what teachers think they are doing, why, and what it looks like. Some of this is down to their own experiences as learners, which are powerful shapers of teaching practice. The quality and nature of teachers’ own experience in schools then becomes a starting point for the quality of the next generation’s. Teacher education has some influence but evidence suggests that it often lacks close links between theory and practice, role models, sufficient time for reflection, and support beyond the qualification phase in order to ensure the sustainability of learning (Haser and Star, 2009; Westbrook et al., 2009).

Beyond this local reality, the lack of critical engagement with pedagogy at an international level has allowed that space to be filled with ready-made prescriptions from a range of agencies concerned with classroom practice in low-income countries. Some of these prescriptions are based on models of teaching and learning which carry assumptions about quality and about the potential for educational change. On the one hand, for example, there are wide-ranging innovations which are promoted under the general rubric of learner-centredness (more below). On the other hand, there are those approaches which are highly prescriptive in framing teacher action and classroom talk, such as so-called ‘teacher-proof’ textbooks, or teacher education which scripts lessons. These are not only underpinned by very different visions of appropriate pedagogy; they imply very different constructs of teachers’ roles and capacities (Schweisfurth, 2012). They also both deny the contingent nature of pedagogy. The first does so by packaging learner-centred approaches as though they took the same everywhere, and as though they can be imported wholesale from one context to another. The very term ‘learner-centred’ further emphasises just one side of the learning transaction: the needs and experiences of the learner. Teachers’ needs and capacities shape pedagogical change, and attempts at reform will lead to disappointing or unintended outcomes if these are not sufficiently acknowledged (see further discussion below). The second type of prescription also fixes teacher and learner roles and assumes that they are consistent across contexts, or at least can be made consistent in response to an outside directive, and that this would be a good thing. The complexity of external influences at policy and local levels in low-income countries means that different agencies in a given context could simultaneously be promoting these two contradictory models and their vastly different assumptions about the role of teachers and the nature of teaching and learning.

Pedagogy matters, for a number of reasons. Cognitive learning outcomes of the kinds that global learning goals aim to capture are of course important. For these, what teachers and learners do together in the classroom has an important role to play and some pedagogies are more effective than others in generating desired learning outcomes (Westbrook et al., 2013). There are strong arguments suggesting that learner motivation is at least as important and that this is generated beyond the classroom as much as in it (Elliott, 2014), but even within the question of motivation, pedagogy is a significant shaper. However, learners’ experiences of classroom life are important for reasons beyond what are often called ‘the basics’. Schools with needs where learners’ rights may or may not be respected, and the many hours spent in school shape attitudes to relationships, to values, to citizenship, and to one’s own identity and autonomy.

So, part of what is missing from the current debate is a coherent but responsive vision of what good teaching and learning is, what outcomes they should achieve, and what matters to make them happen. There is far greater attention to what they are meant to achieve in terms of recordable learner outcomes as a fixed target for measurement. This begs the question of whether a single vision of quality pedagogy is feasible, given the fact that pedagogy cannot be divorced from the social and resource contexts in which it exists. If such a vision does exist, it would have to be based on sound principles and evidence. It would have to embrace a wide range of cultural norms which frame teaching and learning practice where they support positive processes outcomes. Its implementation would also require acknowledgement of the interaction effects of implementing, evaluating or measuring it.

3. Learner-centred approaches: failed import or missing link?

In the context of quality education, learner-centred education is one vision of best practice, and it is explicitly promoted by influential international organisations. UNESCO (e.g. 2000; 2008) and UNICEF (UNICEF UK, n.d.) in particular embed learner-centred approaches into their understandings of quality education. The International Network for Education in Emergencies, with a steering group that includes those UN organisations as well as CARE, the International Save the Children Alliance, and the World Bank, endorses as a minimum standard for education in emergency and post-emergency situations ‘child-centred methods (which) address the needs of the whole person’ (INEE, 2004: 54). As well as this kind of endorsement at global level, and no doubt flowing from it, in Sub-Saharan Africa in the 1990s LCE ‘emerged as the driving pedagogical ideal for contemporary curriculum reform’ at the national level (Chisholm and Leyendecker, 2009: 692). Few low-income countries will have been untouched by the influence of this vision of good practice, most notably at the policy level.

However, the intersection of these policies with pedagogy as expressed in teachers’ observable practice has in many cases resulted in unintended consequences and selective hybridisation, with limited impact on practice and even less on quality. This is true across a compelling range of countries, including Tanzania.

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3 Maddox (2014) describes a number of ‘unruly’ events surrounding an adult literacy test conducted in Mongolia as part of an international survey. The performance of the test-taker demonstrates not only the absurdity of the test items and conditions in this context; it also shows how the results are likely to be invalid under these conditions.
countries but in England. It is ironic, given the emancipatory narrative which has helped to drive the influence of LCE, that this set of critiques is concerned with equity. On the one hand, questions about whether learners from different social and home backgrounds are equally prepared to operate within the more open pedagogical frames (Bernstein, 1971) of the LCE classroom. On the other hand, there are arguments (e.g. Young, 2013) for an entitlement curriculum which includes the kind of ‘powerful knowledge’ which children need in order to ‘understand and interpret the world. Without it they remain dependent on those who have it’ (Young, 2013: 118). Access to this demands a level of teacher authority and curricular prescription outwith versions of LCE which emphasise learners’ roles in questioning and framing the curriculum.

Neither the evidence on implementation, nor the fundamental questioning of LCE as a concept and practice, can be ignored. There are, however, alternative ways of thinking about the policy implementation process, beyond the question of success or failure, and ways of conceptualising LCE beyond fixed roles for teachers and learners which they live up to or do not. An interactionist perspective on LCE allows a more nuanced understanding that goes beyond obstacles and barriers and the unhelpful ‘polarisation’ (Barrett, 2007) of pedagogy into learner- and teacher-centred variants. Hutton and Elliott’s notion of the ‘pedagogical nexus’ is helpful in understanding the complex interactions between a pedagogical innovation and the context into which it is introduced. This nexus is defined as:

...a set of linked, interactive and mutually reinforcing influences on pupils’ motivation to learn within and because of the schooling process...some influences are in the deep background of the schooling process and could pass unremarked, because invisible to observation and so taken-for-granted by informants as to be beneath mention (Hufston and Elliott, 2000: 117).

In Hufton and Elliott’s original analysis of the phenomenon in Russian schools, these influences included continuity of school, class and teacher; inter-generational continuity; home–school relations; readiness and preparation for schooling; the national curriculum, pedagogics and texts; lesson patterns and structures; pitch and pace; memorisation; and assessment. Their conceptualisation is concerned primarily with learner motivation, but I would extend this and argue that it also shapes teacher motivation, the identities of both teachers and learners, and the interactions between them. This nexus develops over long periods in response to a range of factors and is very resilient to change. Any imported or novel approach interacts with this nexus and needs to embed within it to thrive. A compelling and overarching explanation for the existing evidence on LCE’s implementation in low-income countries has been its prescriptive yet inconsistent conception, and implementation strategies that do not sufficiently acknowledge and work with this nexus.

Beyond the success/failure narrative, exploring teachers’ practice ethnographically points to variations between teachers’ practices, even in very similar contexts. It also points to selective and contextualised adaptation of aspects of learner-centredness (e.g. Barrett, 2008 on Tanzania; Sriprakash, 2010 on India) by reflexive teachers who know their students, live within a given nexus, and manage LCE’s interactions within their own social and professional contexts.

4 Generic pedagogical approaches associated with LCE include child-centred learning and activity-based learning. Specific manifestations include Outcomes-Based Education in South Africa, Joyful Learning in India, and UNICEF’s Child-Friendly Schools. Each of these emphasises different continua from LCE. Child-centredness is constructed on particular understandings of childhood and adult-child relations, for example, while activity-based learning concentrates on techniques teachers use to engage students experientially.
set within a Rights framework, I propose a set of seven ‘minimum standards’ for LCE. Each proposed standard adheres to the most basic principles of LCE. As noted, LCE is not an absolute, but rather a continuum from less learner-centred to more learner-centred practice, along a number of axes (Schweisfurth, 2013), fundamental principles at the heart of practice towards the learner-centred end of the continuum include respect for the rights of learners, and a focus on enhancement of their learning experiences and on capabilities which learners and societies value. These standards draw on the strengths of learner-centred approaches based on the available evidence, and set within a rights framework. It also attempts to address some of the critiques of LCE by pinning down what LCE requires in operation; by promoting cultural variants; and by embracing teaching – including its more authoritative versions – as central to promoting quality education and equity among learners.

Given its troubling status as a controversial yet ‘hooray’ term, it is perhaps surprising that I choose to use the term ‘learner-centred’ to signify the practices specified by this vision. While a pinned-down definition is not the agenda, the minimum standards help to populate the LCE discourse with a meaningful set of benchmarks which limit the range of practices that can be considered learner-centred while establishing a culturally-adaptive framework for promoting good teaching and learning. While the vision here resonates with ‘learning-centred’ pedagogy as set out by O’Sullivan (2004) and others, the term ‘learner’ is used because of the rights foundation of this vision. Rights ultimately trump evidence on learning effectiveness: even if beating children made them learn more, out of fear, it would not be permissible within this framework.

Minimum standards – after the INEE usage of the term – offer a framework both for evaluating existing practice and for helping it to reach its potential within realistic aspirations that can be fitted to context. Together the proposed minimum standards are mutually reinforcing and are intended to work with, and become part of, the pedagogical nexus in any given context in a responsive and interactive way. They are not intended to impose a construction of LCE which clashes with cultural norms or which demands high levels of teaching resources. Rather, this vision of LCE understands learning as situated within broad cultural norms, within a community and individual context, and based on interactions between teachers and learners. So, for example, the standards do not privilege the individual over the group, or preclude authoritative (as opposed to authoritarian) teacher roles, or rely on technological solutions for successful implementation. They allow for more conservative and more radical variations in operation to reflect variation between classrooms, schools, and wider cultural and policy contexts. However, they set standards below which pedagogy cannot be considered learner-centred. These can be used by all agencies – global, national and local – concerned with teaching and learning, to promote good pedagogical practice as an enabler goal without which improved learning outcomes beyond 2015 are not possible.

Below I re-examine each of these minimum standards, and set each within the current discussion on education goals post-2015, including the concerns for quality, monitoring/measurement, and learning outcomes. The current discussions of goals and targets, and their focus on measurable learning outcomes, invites this revisiting. The ‘how’ questions of achieving those targets have not yet been adequately addressed; this is not just an omission but potentially an interacting factor likely to influence teaching practice, not necessarily in helpful ways. It is not just interactions between teachers and learners which create the climate and practice of teaching and learning; global agendas introduce other factors which shape (or attempt to shape) their contours. Without a vision of good pedagogy, the goals/targets (measured learning outcomes) drive the means (probably teaching to the test). The analysis points to a good fit in spirit between the standards and some of the emergent aspirations, but the contingent and contextualised nature of the standards, and the challenges of measuring and monitoring progress towards them demonstrate the limitations of broad universal goals when trying to make a real difference to learning in classrooms. Still, key dimensions of an enabling goal, they are important, and the challenge of evaluating their implementation through measurement should not preclude their promotion.

The first standard sets out that lessons need to be engaging to students, motivating them to learn. Learner motivation and cognitive engagement are central to the learning experience. While there are some commonalities in terms of situations that learners are likely to find engaging, these are not universal. The patience and silent communal attention demonstrated in some Asian classrooms, for example, allows for particular pedagogical forms which demand sustained concentration (see for example, Watkins and Biggs, 1996) – teaching practices which would not be likely to motivate in a classroom in contemporary England or Canada, for instance. This motivation stems not just from what learners are experiencing in the classroom, but from cultural expectations of, and respect for, education and teachers. Hufton and Elliott have also pointed to the importance of this form of motivation in the Russian pedagogical nexus. There is no universal script that will resonate with all of these variations.

The importance of motivation to learning speaks to the quality and learning outcomes agenda for 2015. Literature from educational psychology on motivation, theoretical literature in the constructivist tradition, and evidence from empirical studies (for an overview of the evidence, see Schweisfurth, 2013) all highlight the centrality of motivation, and so any understanding of quality education needs to include it. It feeds a virtuous interactive cycle of positive outcomes for individual learners, since successful learning is motivating in itself. However, as a scaled up goal for universal application, this minimum standard raises multiple problems for those who would wish to measure it in order to compare it across contexts or over time. At best, we can find observable proxy indicators, such as the ‘time on task’ metrics that Alexander (1996, 2014) and others have roundly criticised. Even if metrics could be devised that captured what matters in terms of pupil motivation, it would not be possible to state universally how motivation can be achieved through pedagogical practice in every context and therefore comparative measures would not be meaningful. Motivation is simply too embedded in the pedagogical nexus of each setting and what motivates in one may not in another.

The second ‘minimum standard’ argues for mutual respect between teachers and learners, and for a communal atmosphere and interpersonal relationships which reflect this. Rights of learners need to be respected in the forms of sanction that are used (that is, no corporal punishment or use of humiliation) and in relationships (no exploitation, sexual or otherwise). Evidence is clear, and disturbing, that many learners currently experience schooling as fearful, exploitative and/or violent (Harber, 2002; Leach and Humphreys, 2007). Yet a rights-based approach not only respects learners’ basic rights; it acknowledges the evidence that learning is best facilitated where learners are not fearful and where codes of conduct are transparent and trustworthy (Gennis, 2002). However, in some cultural contexts relations may be more formal and distant than in others; teachers may be more or less frank about learners’ responses to questions or their individual progress and this may be more or less public in the classroom.

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5 For a review of the evidence, see Schweisfurth (2013). Relevant evidence on teaching and learning is also analysed systematically in Westbrook et al. (2013). Examples rather than full sets of evidence are cited here.
Learners acculturate to and expect these types of feedback. Learners learn from direct, specific feedback but it needs to be couched respectfully; equally, they can become immune to constant, non-specific praise, no matter how pleasant. This standard is therefore not intended to dictate a particular tone of classroom discourse.

This standard has its basis in a rights framework, a solid foundation for the post-2015 agenda, and one that has advocates from among the million voices consultation as well as within UNESCO and other agencies. There already exist mechanisms for certifying and monitoring rights in schools and classrooms, for example through the standards set by UNICEF’s Rights-Respecting and Child-Friendly Schools (http://www.unicef.org.uk/rrsa; http://www.unicef.org/lifeskills_index_7260.html).

Thirdly, what is taught needs to build on learners’ existing knowledge and skills. Learning challenges are most effective and motivating when they are developmental but are within appropriate reach of learners (as in Vygotsky’s ‘Zone of Proximal Development’) (Daniels, 1996). The baseline is necessarily dependent on context, and does not necessarily align with what the curriculum dictates should be known at a particular stage. National curricula are not always realistic in themselves, and the assumption that cohorts pass fully ready from each stage to the next in a systematic manner is flawed. Traditional LCE often situates the existing baseline within each individual learner, prescribing individualised learning plans and teacher attention to scaffolding for each learner, in the constructivist tradition. However, resource constraints (particularly large classes) and collectivist cultural and pedagogical traditions mean that this may not be suitable or feasible for all contexts.

Here again the intention behind this standard – improved learning through incremental development – is in keeping with the outcomes agenda, but would prove challenging if not impossible for a universal, norm-referenced learning goal to capture. It could at best evaluate a fixed point of achievement; it would play no role in facilitating or monitoring improvement from a relative standpoint. So, with a focus on outcomes rather than processes, no matter how impressive improvements have been within a given timeframe, if these do not meet benchmarks of a learning goal, teachers and learners will go unrewarded, potentially demotivated and stigmatised despite their best efforts. At worst, backwash effects of such a goal may also work against the implementation of this standard. If all children of seven everywhere are supposed to have achieved $x$, then pressurised teachers are likely to focus on this whether or not the learners have achieved $a$ to $w$.

The fourth minimum standard reinforces the importance of dialogic teaching, which has been shown to support learning and to make it visible (Alexander, 2008b; Hattie, 2009; Westbrook et al., 2013). This is in contrast to frontal teaching modes and choral chanted responses which characterise many classrooms in low-income contexts (e.g. Hardman et al., 2009). This speaks both to the rights agenda, by securing learners’ rights to express opinions and to participate, and to evidence on cognitive development. It is also the practical embodiment of an interactionist perspective on learning. High quality classroom talk (not just verbal interaction of any kind) develops both individual agency and engagement, and provides teachers with constant feedback on individual and group progress. Again, the resource reality of large class sizes in most low income countries means that creative implementation will require many forms of dialogue between different actors.

Dialogic pedagogy, while potentially leading to improved outcomes, is precisely the kind of process variable that the current post-2015 discussion is avoiding in the pre-occupation with outcomes. The subtle skills required for effective dialogic teaching, and the difficulty in measuring them also make this an elusive goal to capture within the current understanding of evidence. Counting types of classroom interactions on a structured lesson observation form is methodologically feasible, and in an intensive, well-funded research programme these could be aggregated to build up national and cross-national generalisations about practice, which could then be correlated with outcomes. However, this would demand high levels of observer skill, and large numbers of observers. Even if such resources existed, if the sole purpose of the exercise were for monitoring at an aggregated level, this would not be a sensible use of those resources. Such a project would be most meaningful if the data gathered were used for diagnostic and developmental purposes with individual or groups of teachers.

A curriculum of relevance to learners’ present and future lives is the fifth standard in this conceptualisation of LCE. Meaningful pattern building requires that learners are able to engage with and apply what is being taught within the context of their private and social worlds (Ginnis, 2002). In valuing individuals’ lived experiences, it is also rights-respecting. It facilitates responsiveness to particular situations, such as those arising from conflict or natural disaster, making learning additionally meaningful and specific. A key question then becomes: who decides what is relevant to learners’ lives, and how far is this about an individual child or a collective? Young’s (2013) concept of ‘powerful knowledge’ is salient here, and points to space for authoritative teachers and an at least partially-shared entitlement curriculum. Language of instruction is embraced within this standard, given the evidence supporting instruction in home languages (Brock Utne, 2012).

This standard is challenging for a global agenda to address. Local needs and even national goals may not align; international targets would need to be couched in very flexible terms if they were to respond to this imperative and make test items relevant to all learners’ lives and to what they have learnt before. And as Bartlett (2014) points out, it is difficult for global, Western-derived literacy tests to respond either to the agenda of local relevance, to broad conceptions of literacy, or to the particularities of literacy in different languages.

The sixth standard sets out that curriculum and pedagogy embrace skills and attitude outcomes as well as the acquisition of knowledge (particularly knowledge acquired through rote learning). It implies ‘learning by doing’ and therefore classroom variety, demonstrated to be motivating (Ginnis, 2002). It also emphasises the importance of skills and attitudes relevant for citizenship, including critical and creative thinking. The new attention to global citizenship, various forms of well-being, and other more holistic goals, for example in the Learning Metrics Task Force, aligns with this goal. Meta-analysis of research across a range of contexts has pointed to the effectiveness of more learner-centred relationships and techniques in developing skills such as learner autonomy and critical thinking as learning outcomes (Cornelius-White, 2007).

The final minimum standard is regarding assessment. Based on the principles of assessment for learning (Black and William, 2005), assessment processes should be meaningful for those being assessed so that their learning is improved by it. They also need to flow from the principles above, and so should not be purely content-driven or based on rote learning. They should be based on and build on what learners have acquired and be informative and relevant both to teachers and learners. Formative assessment is embedded in the dialogical pedagogy of minimum standard four. It is doubtful whether universal tests, conducted for monitoring progress at national and global levels can achieve assessment for learning. They are certainly not assessment for learning in that they do not serve the immediate needs of teachers or learners; instead, the results are aggregated and divorced from their local contexts and serve no learner-specific diagnostic or experiential purpose at the level of the individual or classroom.
5. Conclusion

If the minimum standards proposed in this reconceptualisation of LCE represent a vision of sound pedagogical practice, and careful appraisal of evidence, theory and development imperatives suggests that they are, then the current direction of the post-2015 agenda in its preoccupation with learning goals is not yet engaging fully with the question of quality teaching and learning processes. Teaching and learning are neither stable nor discreet from each other or their environments. A more interactionist and less functionalist perspective on pedagogy raises questions about current conceptions of teaching and learning and facilitates a more nuanced view in at least three ways. Firstly, it highlights the ways in which pedagogy is embodied in classroom, local and national contexts, and the importance of the interactions between these levels. Secondly, it raises the status of interactions as central to pedagogy in itself. Finally, it acknowledges the interaction of any globalised measurement of learning with the processes of teaching and learning it is indirectly trying to address.

Returning to the questions posed at the beginning of the article concerning a vision of pedagogy and appropriate goals and monitoring for a post-2015 agenda, the discussion above paints a complex picture but one with clear implications. It is important that pedagogy supports both learning and rights, and learner-centred pedagogy as conceptualised here has a number of basic principles with considerable promise. As such, it offers possibilities as an enabling goal which provides a mechanism through which meaningful learning targets might be realised. While difficult to quantify and therefore not easily subjected to the usual scrutiny that targets receive, it is deserving of the attention of international agencies in collaboration with national policy makers and local shapers of pedagogical practice. That attention would need to include investment in developmental support for teachers and teacher educators, and the gathering and comparing of evidence on sound local practice which respects both the universals – in the form of the minimum standards – and the specifics – in the form of local variations and enactments of these. While these minimum standards have their basis in evidence, theory, and rights, they require further testing and refinement to ensure that they support improved learning outcomes and educational experiences equitably in a full range of contexts.

Where the broad goals are to make pedagogy more conducive to meaningful learning outcomes and more respecting of learners’ rights, principles of learner-centredness can usefully be invoked but in implementation these will be subject to local variation and will interact with the existing pedagogical nexus. This will inevitably frustrate those with a functionalist view of classrooms and a belief in the power of international testing data to monitor, compare and change them. However, I would argue that in terms of improving quality in education, we are already frustrated, and the data on outcomes as globally conceived are not so far shedding light in the right places. On that note, I would conclude with an illuminating analogy:

There is a well-known anecdote of a man searching for his car keys under a street lamp. When asked whether he is sure that he had dropped them nearby, he replied that he lost them elsewhere but ‘this is where the light is showing’ (Elliott, 2014: 36).

Much like the man who lost his keys, policy makers and the international development community have focused on aspects of education systems that can be readily measured and influenced, underplaying those less amenable to standardisation, monitoring or change. Pedagogy is one of these. The post-2015 agenda is an opportunity to look beyond the small circle of light cast by data on outcomes and to think inclusively about the interactions within and beyond classrooms and what these mean for development.


