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Disaster didacticism: Pedagogical interventions and the 'learning crisis'

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ABSTRACT

This essay offers a critical perspective on the prevailing language of 'learning crisis' and on the solutions widely promoted by international organisations (IOs) active in lower- and middle-income countries. Focusing specifically on pedagogical interventions, it sets out three cases: foundational learning; information technology; and systematic observation of teachers' classroom practice. Five questions frame the subsequent discussion: 1. What are the potential unintended effects of the language of crisis? 2. Do the understandings of pedagogy embedded in these measures reflect how teaching and learning function in different contexts? 3. In the quest for evidence, what evidence is being overlooked? 4. What are the risks of focusing interventions on literacy and numeracy, and their measurement? 5. What legitimacy do international actors have in defining and measuring quality pedagogy and prescribing interventions?

1. Introduction

> A growing body of evidence provide evidence [sic] of poor teaching practices and little to no learning going on inside the classroom. As such, the learning crisis is a reflection of a teaching crisis. (Molina et al., 2018)

There is much about the statement above that captures the contemporary *Zeitgeist* surrounding pedagogy in lower- and middle-income countries (LMICs). Crisis is invoked twice. Evidence is invoked twice; once presumably by mistake. A deficit discourse about classrooms and outcomes dominates ('poor teaching practices', 'little to no learning'). Pedagogy is to blame, and by implication, teachers. And it's a working paper housed at the World Bank – historically not engaged with classroom teaching and learning practices – that is offering this rhetoric. This quote dates from 2018. Since then, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this discourse of crisis in relation to teaching and learning. After Klein's (2007) term 'disaster capitalism', I am, for the purposes of this essay, coining this 'disaster didacticism'. It is didacticism in its specific focus on teaching and learning (broadly, didactics) but also in the further connotations of the term which imply a tendency to be patronising and to have moral instruction as an ulterior motive.

While not underestimating the impact of school closures on learners or the importance of maximising learning, in this article I intend to unpack and problematise this *Zeitgeist*. The article focuses on the discourses and programming found in international organisations (IOs). While national governments have the ultimate say in governing education policy and practice, the influence of IOs is significant, not least through partnerships such as the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) and wider co-operation between donors and governments.[1] The paper builds on recent scholarship on the interests and discourses of education agencies in the 'building back better' era (eg Zancajo et al., 2022; Morris et al., 2022) but it focuses specifically on classroom pedagogy and the language that frames interventions in it.

SDG4's call for inclusive, quality education coupled with post-MDGs concern about poor learning outcomes have mobilised new attention to classroom processes. On top of this pre-pandemic baseline, the impact of COVID-19 has been universal across health, economic and social sectors. As an exogenous crisis (Zancajo et al., 2022) its effects on pedagogical crisis-naming and crisis-solving are part of a bigger disruptive wave. COVID-19 was inarguably a shock to systems of education across the world, and the statistics are startling: for example, by 15 April 2020, 191 countries had closed down schools in response to COVID-19 (McKinsey, 2020) and over time this continued to varying degrees internationally throughout the pandemic, affecting children's learning in unprecedented ways.

However, in crisis there can be perceived opportunities for novel solutions and 'building back better', including in relation to pedagogy. I will here present three cases of the solutions proposed by IOs: firstly, the catch-up agenda underpinning so-called 'foundational learning';

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[1] Some of the issues discussed in this essay may also pertain to contexts not in receipt of development assistance, but the nature of the relationship with IOs makes the situation of LMICs particular.

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secondly, the invigorated emphasis on digital learning, as an almost universal panacea across agencies; and finally, the focus on data generation including about classroom practices (as found, for example, in the World Bank's Teach classroom observation tool). In the second part of the paper I pose five questions about how pedagogy is conceptualised and operationalised in these institutional arenas, contrasting them with other perspectives and approaches. I argue (yet again) for a more nuanced and contextualised understanding of pedagogy - ultimately a less didactic approach.

The essay is not based on a systematic review of the literature and so should not be read as a state of the art. However, while my perspective is particular it is based on extensive research and scholarship on pedagogy in international perspective (eg Schweisfurth, 2002, 2011, 2013; Schweisfurth and Elliott, 2019; Schweisfurth et al., 2022), evaluation work with international organisations including the World Bank (as a reviewer of the Global Partnership for Education), UNICEF and UNESCO, and secondment at the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (formerly Department for International Development, as Senior Research Officer from 2018 to 2021). If the essay proves provocative, it is intentionally so. However, my intention is to provoke dialogue rather than divisions.

2. Context: the learning crisis, COVID-19, and pedagogical priorities

Alexander (2001) famously noted that there is a lack of attention to pedagogy at the global level, likening it to a 'deep well' that global actors cannot fathom and so avoid looking into. He argued that this negligence perpetuated an inputs-outcomes model of education that left the processes that turn resources into results locked in a black box. This call has been picked up by scholars over the years, including in my own work. Where pedagogy has received attention, it has largely been from a prescriptive rather than evidence-based perspective, for example the promotion of learner-centred education (Schweisfurth, 2011, 2013, 2015).

While the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were mainly concerned with access to education and improving enrolment, especially for girls, since 2015 the SDGs have extended this focus to include quality. Therefore, at least at the discursive level, there is now more attention to what happens in classrooms. However, beneath the surface this quickly breaks down when it comes to measurement. Indicators for SDG4, for example, operationalise quality teaching and learning by counting the qualifications of teachers rather than looking in depth at what they do (United Nations Statistics Division, n.d.). Assessing the latter is labour-intensive and fraught with issues of comparability due to inter-observer reliability on the one hand and cultural and individual variations of good practice on the other: some of the darker reaches of the Alexander's deep well.

Fuelling the new emphasis on quality, in the latter stages of the MDGs awareness grew that while enrolment gains were impressive, this was not translating into learning gains and that therefore the benefits of education were unlikely to be felt. UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank, the World Economic Forum (WEF) and the UN all issued warnings about the learning crisis and the disasters that loomed if it were not given urgent attention. The existence of the learning crisis now seems largely taken for granted as a wider part of development discourse and a focus for intervention. The World Bank measures this using a 'learning poverty' index:

> Using a measure developed jointly by the World Bank and UNESCO's Institute of Statistics, we have determined that 53 % of children in low- and middle-income countries cannot read and understand a simple story by the end of primary school. In poor countries, the level is as high as 80%. Such high levels of illiteracy are an early warning sign that all global educational goals and other related sustainable development goals are in jeopardy (https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/education/brief/what-is-learning-poverty).

Note the rhetoric of crisis here, including 'early warning sign' and 'jeopardy'. The translation of the learning crisis into a classroom practice issue quickly follows from this narrative, and in many cases explicitly, such as in the GPE's Strategic Plan 2025: 'the learning crisis is a teaching crisis' (p 10).

3. Disaster didacticism: three cases

Morris et al. (2022) insightfully tell the policy story of education crisis management by agencies in response to COVID as a play of three acts: (1) introduction: in which a strategic description of the setting leads to a call to action in response to the narration of crisis; (2) the 'path to salvation' in which blame is apportioned and solutions set out; and (3) the promissory conclusion, where a better future is ensured if (and only if) the protagonist accepts and acts on the proposed solutions (Morris et al., 2022: 694–695). In the subsections below, I borrow this narrative structure to provide a brief overview of three cases of disaster didacticism: foundational learning, digital learning and the generation and use of evidence on classroom practices.

3.1. Foundational learning

Act one – the problem: the discourse of learning crisis pre-existed COVID but both the wider pattern of low outcomes and the inequalities underpinning them were deepened by COVID school closures. This problem is set out prominently across a range of research and IO documents and websites, in remarkably coherent language. For example, a 2021 book jointly authored by UNESCO, World Bank and UN Children's Fund opens with the following:

> The global disruption to education caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is without parallel, and its effects on learning have been severe. The crisis brought education systems across the world to a halt, with school closures affecting more than 1.6 billion learners. While nearly every country in the world offered remote learning opportunities for students, the quality and reach of such initiatives varied greatly, and they were at best partial substitutes for in-person learning…Growing evidence on the impacts of school closures on children's learning depicts a harrowing reality. Learning losses have been large and inequitable: recent learning assessments show that children in many countries have missed out on most or all of the academic learning they would ordinarily have acquired in school, with younger and more marginalised children often missing out the most. The global learning crisis has grown by even more than previously feared: this generation of students now risks losing $17 trillion in lifetime earnings in present value as a result of school closures, In low- and middle-income countries, the share of children living in Learning Poverty—already over 50 % before the pandemic—will rise sharply, potentially up to 70 %…(UNESCO, World Bank and UN Children's Fund, 2021: 6).

Most of the evidence available is data on literacy test scores, with some also available on numeracy. These are argued to be the 'building blocks' from which all other learning stems (as cited in the World Bank's Commitment to Action on Foundational Learning, 2022).

Thus addressing learning loss in these areas is the most urgent problem.

Act two – the solution: the curricular implications are evident, demanding targeted focus on a specific range of skills, especially literacy and numeracy. There are also, however, pedagogical implications:

> Learning recovery programmes can …make up the losses with a contextually appropriate mix of proven techniques for promoting foundational learning: consolidating the curriculum, extending

> instructional time, and making learning more efficient through targeted instruction, structured pedagogy, small-group tutoring, and self-guided learning programmes. (UNESCO et al., 2021: 7)

Structured pedagogy[2] is mentioned eight times in the document.

In addition to pedagogical and curricular shifts toward more focused curriculum and structured pedagogy, part of the solution is to be found in measuring outcomes, especially in literacy. The World Bank's Learning Poverty Index focuses on literacy for three stated reasons, two of which are about measurement:

1. Reading proficiency is an easily understood learning measure.
2. Reading is a student's gateway to learning in other areas.
3. Reading proficiency can serve as a proxy for foundational learning in other subjects. (https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/education/brief/what-is-learning-poverty).

As a further example of this call for measurement as part of the solution, the joint Global Education Monitoring Team and Association for the Development of Education in Africa 2022 Spotlight Report on improving foundational learning in Africa argues that data are insufficient and participation in cross-national tests of achievement too low; it advocates for drawing on and increasing existing resources going into testing in order to enhance monitoring of trends:

> In 2021, UNESCO, UNICEF and the World Bank established the Learning Data Compact, committing to 'increase the availability, use and impact of learning data' and 'provide a more equitable, flexible and efficient mechanism to expand country capacity, for the production and use of good quality data, for better education policies' (UNESCO et al., 2021, p. 1). Such promises of support should also take into account the need to support countries. Funding could be tied to a commitment to carry out large-scale assessments that meet international standards (UIS, 2018; GEM/AEDA, 2022).

The same document also argues for a simplified and focused curriculum.

Act three – the promise: The Foreword to the GEMR/AEDA document sums up nicely what is promised:

> By making the findings of this report actionable, it is my hope that national governments and development partners will take decisive action to empower all children with the necessary foundational skills to realise their full potential, because all children are Born to Learn.

Thus we see a shift in discourse from disaster to promise via tighter focus on and assessment of the basics and firmer control of teachers' work, with noteworthy shifts in the emotive language.

3.2. The digitalisation of pedagogy as panacea

Act one – the problem: the learning crisis is so profound that it cannot be solved through traditional means. Learner dependency on underskilled teachers and poorly-resourced classrooms denies them access to the full breadth of knowledge. The digital divide deepens educational inequalities and so universal access to hardware and the internet is essential to overcome both the learning crisis and the inequalities that COVID has exacerbated. Access to IT has been framed as a universal right in this context, denied to many:

> To state the obvious, digital literacy and access are a basic right in the twenty-first century; without them it is increasingly difficult to participate civically and economically. One of the painful realisations of the global pandemic is that those with connectivity and access to digital skills were able to continue to learn remotely while schools closed down (and to benefit from other vital information in real time), whereas those without such access and skills missed out on learning and the other benefits physical learning institutions bring. As a result of this digital divide, gaps in educational opportunity and outcomes between and within nations augmented. The first order of business is to close this divide and to consider digital literacy, for students and teachers, one of the essential literacies of the twenty-first century (UNESCO Futures of Education, 2021: 34).

Act two – the solution: since before the pandemic, many IOs including private foundations have advocated for the role of technology in education, including UNESCO (in its Qingdao Declaration of 2015), Pearson (through Connection Education), McKinsey (through McKinsey Digital), UNICEF (embedded in its strategy 2019–30) (Morris et al., 2022).

IT solutions open up schools to the outside world (OECD 2020). The question of delivery models, given the financial and logistical challenge of reaching all learners, is central to the debate, and here the role of private providers and philanthropists through multi-stakeholder partnerships is essential.

Act three – the promise: According to the World Bank:

> The greater use of remote learning approaches, along with better support for parents and caregivers, can be used as a launching pad to build more equitable, more resilient education systems. (World Bank, 2022a, 2022b: 18)

This promise can be met most efficiently and inexpensively through networked partnerships. For example, the World Bank's Digital Development Partnerships involves a wide range of stakeholders, including Google, who endorse this alignment and the promises it offers in education but also beyond:

> Google is proud to join the Digital Development Partnership in 2020. Technology enables individuals to find new opportunities, businesses to find new markets, entrepreneurs to build new businesses, and governments to solve major challenges facing the nation and the world. But we have also seen that many are left out of this picture. It is critical that governments and businesses work together, through structures such as the Digital Development Partnership, to ensure that the benefits of technology are shared by everyone, that people have the skills to participate, and that policies foster inclusive economic growth across all countries (World Bank, n.d.)

Digitalisation is thus seen as not only a solution to the learning crisis and digital divide, but as a promising avenue for equity and especially for economic growth.

3.3. Data on teaching

Act one – the problem: extending the argument for the need for more data and the promise of improvements through tracking takes us into the territory of pedagogy. Even the World Bank – which has long focused efforts on funding, data and other macro-level interventions in education - has noted the lack of attention to pedagogy and the importance of classroom practice for learning outcomes. The monitoring of learning outcomes has been a powerful driver of education for a long time, but what has been notably absent is datasets on teaching practices. Self-reporting PISA data is limited by the fact that it is not based on observation, and it is by definition confined to OECD countries, as is the TALIS bank of observation data. We do not know enough about what is happening in classrooms, how to target improvement, and whether

[2] Structured pedagogy involves the provision of prepared lesson plans and packages of linked activities to teachers, along with training in their use. It is distinct from scripted lessons but is on the continuum from complete teacher freedom to full control of teachers' practice. (J-PAL, n.d.).

improvements are taking place.

Act two – the solution

'To improve teaching practices, we first need to measure them' (Introductory video, World Bank, 2022a, 2022b).

The World Bank launched in 2018 a new tool called Teach, which includes an observation schedule to assess teaching practices across the broad domains of time-on-task, quality of teaching, and other aspects of the learning environment. The tool has 28 items which the trained observer ranks from 1 to 5. It is standardised but additional items can be added to fit the local or national context. In Pakistan, for example, a version of the tool has been used 200,000 times (Introductory video, World Bank, 2022a, 2022b).

The tool can serve a number of purposes:

> First, the tool can be used as a **system diagnostic**, which allows governments to get a clear snapshot of the current state of teaching practices and teaching quality in classrooms. In this capacity, *Teach* Primary can be leveraged as a **monitoring and evaluation (M&E) tool** to assess the results of a specific education policy or programme that targets teacher practices, such as the deployment of a new curriculum or a new instructional model. The tool can also be integrated within a teacher professional development system to help identify individual teachers' strengths and weaknesses and **to provide targeted support to teachers.** (World Bank, 2022a, 2022b, bold in original).

While this is not explicitly set out, it would also be possible to compare aggregated scores across regions or between countries.

Act three – the promise: tracking pedagogy will focus systems on improving practice from the ground-up, and provide the data they need to monitor initiatives to improve pedagogy and develop teacher capacity. This monitoring will lead to improvements to practice and outcomes in the context of the learning crisis. Eric Hanushek endorses it in the introductory video as 'the single most important thing the World Bank has done in the last 30 years' (World Bank, 2022a, 2022b).

This third case of three acts sees the lack of data on teaching as a crisis in itself, and measurement as the crucial first step for influential IOs in fixing the learning crisis problem.

4. Questions, and alternatives to disaster didacticism

All three of these cases start from a narrative of crisis, even disaster. I have so far held back from explicit critique of these narratives, and of the solutions proposed above. I now turn to the other side of the didacticism coin. The Cambridge on-line Dictionary (https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/didactic) defines didactic (adjective) as: 1. Intended to teach, especially in a way that is too determined or eager, and often fixed and unwilling to change; 2. Intended to teach people a moral lesson. These connotations of didacticism bring me to a set of critiques and questions around current agendas in pedagogy:

1) What are the potential unintended effects of the language of crisis?
2) Do the understandings of pedagogy embedded in these measures reflect how teaching and learning function in different contexts?
3) In the quest for evidence, what evidence is being overlooked?
4) What are the risks of focusing interventions on literacy and numeracy, and their measurement?
5) What legitimacy do international actors have in defining and measuring quality pedagogy and prescribing interventions?

In addressing the first question, I draw firstly on Iveta Silova's decolonial take on the learning crisis: that it is not so much a crisis of learning as a crisis of development. She argues that:

> This crisis stems, in part, from the logic of colonialism underpinning the collective work of many international financial institutions, bilateral and multilateral donors, foundations, as well as non-governmental organisations. The colonial logic perpetuates divisions of the world into 'developed' and 'developing' countries, reinforces hierarchies of power and knowledge, and re-inscribes Western 'best practices' as solutions to the so-called 'learning crisis.' (Silova, 2018)

She goes on to claim in strong terms that local actors are positioned as '…unaware, passive, corrupt, or simply incapable of meaningful participation in education policy making and school practice'. So, in her view, the language of crisis serves to undermine local efforts and position global actors at centre stage.

From another angle of critique, much of the literature on crisis in general and disaster capitalism in particular suggests that the language of crisis is used with intent to foster a sense of emergency and open space for interventions that would otherwise take too long or be unpalatable. With disaster capitalism, this space is occupied by profit-making enterprises, often bypassing the usual procurement regulations by invoking a need for haste and scale and thereby opening the door to corrupt practices and profiteering (as in the UK's personal protective equipment procurement scandal during the COVID pandemic (https://www.bmj.com/content/372/bmj.n639). What motivations might international organisations have in scaremongering about learning outcomes and the need to address the classroom processes that help to create them? A benign view would be that the language of crisis may be helpful in galvanising a coherent consensus behind a genuinely urgent need. A less benign view might relate to the needs of these organisations to sustain legitimacy in a context of scarce resources and as a defensive move to distract from their own repeated failures (as Silova points out) to address the challenges of development. It is not far from here to 'it's teachers' fault' and a deficit view of pedagogy in lower income countries. I have elsewhere (Schweisfurth, 2022) pointed to the potentially labelling and demoralising and always unhelpful language of 'quality teachers' as an extension of this discourse.

The second question raises fundamental issues about the nature of pedagogy, and epistemological and methodological doubts about how international organisations understand it and whether this reflects the realities of processes of teaching and learning. Alexander's (2001) oft-cited definition of pedagogy includes both the observable act of teaching, and the beliefs, philosophies and traditions behind it, both individual and cultural. Arguably, all three of the IO solutions discussed here focus exclusively on the first: foundational learning through a prescribed curricular focus and structured pedagogy; Teach through being observation-based; and technologization through focusing on tools rather than their meanings for the actors involved. In addition, in order for these pedagogical promissory narratives to cohere with the *Zeitgeist*, they need to be measurable across time, so improvement can be evidenced, and across space, so that countries can be compared, either to demonstrate how particular interventions have led to improvements, to target intensive intervention, or to celebrate or name and shame outliers. This, by definition, requires the tools of quantification, including atomisation of teaching and learning processes into component variables, and global instruments used in the same ways and measuring the same things across a wide range of contexts (as in the World Bank's Teach observation tool).

However, extending Alexander's definition, a school of thought to which I subscribe sees pedagogy not as a series of observable and amenable actions but as part of an open system that is profoundly shaped by the wider context in which it is situated and which cannot readily be disentangled from it. Alexander's (2001) work on the relationship between pedagogy and culture demonstrates this in painstaking depth across five national contexts. The concepts of a 'pedagogical nexus' (Hufton and Elliott, 2000; Schweisfurth and Elliott, 2019) and the 'onto-cultural context' (Rappleye and Komatsu, 2017) extend the analysis of this relationship. They provide evidence of how, across a range of cases, these complex interrelationships become self-sustaining and how

they enable pedagogical traditions to continue over long periods of time, decades or even centuries. Such traditions are more durable than imported alternatives and are difficult to influence, change or replace, especially from outside that nexus. From a different tradition and an economist's perspective but with similar implications, Pritchett (2015) concludes that what is important for improving outcomes is a coherence of accountabilities across a system, with classroom accountabilities having to be aligned with all the rest in order for them to function meaningfully.

For generating metrics that tell us something universally meaningful about pedagogy, or for prescribing pedagogical measurements or interventions that do not pre-exist within the ecosystem of this nexus, this creates serious problems. In this view, pedagogy cannot by definition be broken down into constituent parts that can be measured or manipulated in isolation from the rest of the ecosystem. If it is to be improved, it has to be approached from within this wider web of influences in a more holistic way. In order to achieve this, it has to be understood holistically as well. The World Bank's Teach observation process belies this (despite describing the tool as holistic). It assumes firstly, from a relatively thin evidence base relying largely on research from higher-income contexts (Mitchell and Milligan,) that all good classrooms universally share particular practices. Secondly, it assumes that these practices can be observed and assessed discretely from each other and decontextualised from the wider environment.

A recent review of comparative education literature (Schweisfurth et al., 2022) demonstrated a marked divide between distinct traditions for researching pedagogy. One camp tends to focus on processes and use qualitative, especially ethnographic methods to understand pedagogical relationships and their situated nature. The other camp is concerned primarily with outcomes and uses quantitative methods to establish relationships of causality between discrete aspects of pedagogy, context and learning outcomes. These camps function independently of each other with little cross-referencing. Readers are likely to guess easily which type of research is most likely to be funded by development agencies. I am not arguing that this research has no place in enriching understandings of pedagogy, or that quantitative research cannot also inform the design or implications of ethnography. However, there is much that could be learned from a more synthesising and holistic approach that situates findings of any kind meaningfully in context, and complements aggregated generalised findings with granular insights that may nuance them or even call them into question. Hence, there is an urgent need for dialogue between the erstwhile separate research camps.

This call for holism has implications for the gathering of evidence and calls into doubt the universality of any classroom observation tool that might be used for diagnosis or assessment of individual teachers or teachers across a system on at least two levels. On one level, separating different components of pedagogy from each other and from their context belies their interdependency. For example, Mitchell (2023) notes the significance of peer support in classrooms, particularly in context of communal life and solidarity, as in the Southern African philosophy and practice of Ubuntu. Focusing observation on what teachers are doing without due attention to these wider interactions provides a partial and obscured view (see also Mitchell and Milligan,). On another level, what is in cultural terms considered effective in one context may be considered inappropriate in others, for not being in keeping with longstanding traditions and cultural expectations. That is not to say that cultural traditions are always sacred and immutable (if that were the case, beating children would still be the accepted norm in schools in England, for example). However, the nuances of teacher-learner interactions cannot readily be standardised; for example, what is considered harsh or even abusive reprimand of a learner by a teacher in one context may be considered robust, honest and justified critique in another. Human and child rights legislation sets out useful red lines (Schweisfurth, 2020) but there are vast grey areas before we reach the red lines.

This leads to question three. Evidence – widely ignored in the current landscape of pedagogical intervention by IOs – also suggests that what is effective to improve learning outcomes in one context may be less effective in another. As Pritchett (2015: 7–8 notes): '…there is no simple arithmetic decomposition of student learning outcomes in one system versus another that relies on a single estimate of the impact of proximate determinants.'

In other words, in the simplest intervention terms, the evidence suggests that a 'what works' approach doesn't work. Whole system solutions that work with the pedagogical nexus (although Pritchatt would be unlikely to use the term and is primarily concerned with accountability structures) are more meaningful, but not particularly palatable to a solutions-focused development community looking for answers. Despite all the logistical challenges it brings, it is tidier to invest in IT hardware and light-touch CPD for teachers to facilitate use in the classroom, and hope that makes a difference. The evidence, however, suggests that this massive collective effort at least in part misses the point: 'when it comes to the age-old question of: what comes first – technology or pedagogy? …we can safely say that the answer is pedagogy' (Education Technology, nd).

Another source of evidence is in the long history of pedagogical reforms that have not had the consequences they intended. The panaceas of the past provide a cautionary tale to any attempt to intervene in pedagogy in ways which are imported from outside the context of implementation. A well-evidenced example is learner-centred pedagogy (LCP). In the 1990s, virtually every national plan for education in Sub-Saharan Africa included reference to it as a preferred pedagogy (Chisholm and Leyendecker, 2008) and IOs, NGOs, aid agencies, NGOs and national governments alike invested heavily in it, including teacher training. However, when viewed over time, the overall story is fairly unequivocal: in almost all contexts where it was imported, it did not have the intended effects on classroom practices (Schweisfurth, 2011, 2013). There are myriad reasons for this but they add up to a strong message about the futility of interventions that are not based on an informed understanding of the cultural, resource and political context. Despite this evidence, all three of the cases of disaster didacticism discussed here are imported with little or no sensitisation to context, except in bolted-on ways. While the UNESCO et al. (2021) document links structured pedagogy to contextualisation of solutions, it is far from clear how structured pedagogy is likely to respond to local needs or even needs at a wider scale, depending on who structures it and with which ideal-typical classrooms in mind.

Evidence from psychology (eg Sternberg, 2004) and set firmly in an African context (Serpell, 2011) is another source supporting more localised solutions to the improvement of pedagogy. Sternberg (2004) has demonstrated empirically that intelligence itself needs to be understood in its cultural context and that teaching which is consciously adapted to the culture of learners is most effective at raising outcomes, including, as Serpell has demonstrated, the cultural context of collectivism.

The fourth question specifically concerns foundational learning and the narrowing of the curricular and pedagogical foci that it entails. While improving foundational learning is not necessarily a zero-sum game, increasing curricular time for 'the basics' inevitably requires taking time from other subject areas and activities.[3] Sternberg's cautions about understanding intelligence in context are salient here as the particular intelligences demanded by foundational learning may be assumed to be more universal than they actually are or that they are equally valued in all cultures. There is also a philosophical question about the purposes of education, including not just its human capital development functions but also its civic and humanistic potential (Spiel et al., 2018). In a symposium of essays focused on foundational learning (Centre for Global Development, 2021) the vast majority of

[3] Unless the school day is extended – a proposal under consideration in some contexts but which carries its own risks

commentators speak with similar voices, with some mild dissent focusing on issues of monitoring and the general risks of top-down approaches insensitive to context. Only one (McLean, 2021) takes a broad view of functional literacy and a *longue durée* historical view of educational change, engaging with the range of functions that education has in different contexts and different times, and challenges the risks that come with a narrowing of the agenda.

In addition to these perennial philosophical and ideological questions about education's purposes beyond foundational learning, it is worth remembering that the damage from COVID-19 and attendant lockdowns and school closures goes well beyond learning loss. The language of crisis has also been used about the mental health effects of the social isolation and disruption to routine caused by COVID-19 lockdowns. Systematic reviews and reports synthesised in a scoping report (Heneghan et al.) evidence cause for concern:

> Eight out of ten children and adolescents report worsening of behaviour or any psychological symptoms or an increase in negative feelings due to the COVID-19 pandemic. School closures contributed to increased anxiety, loneliness and stress; negative feelings due to COVID-19 increased with the duration of school closures.

Given that the majority of mental health disorders start before the age of 14 (Kessler et al., 2007), the language of 'timebomb' often complements the language of crisis where child and adolescent mental health is concerned. However, the research also points to protective factors:

> Mental well-being protective factors include increasing socialisation that includes positive interactions and benefits for other people (prosocial behaviours), along with social connectedness based on experiences of feeling close and connected to others. (Heneghan et al.).

Schools cannot do everything, but they have an important role to play in creating spaces for these positive interactions and social connectedness. A strict emphasis on foundational learning and structured pedagogy could squeeze these out. According to reviews of evidence by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning,[4] programmes which specifically target socio-emotional learning lead to improved ability for students to manage stress and depression, and have better attitudes about themselves and others, as well as more positive feelings about school and enhanced capacity for learning (CASEL 2020). While foundational learning has been argued to be the 'building blocks' for all learning (eg Mastercard Foundation, n.d.) social and emotional learning may well be essential building blocks for foundational learning.[5] It requires space for teachers to respond in real time to the mood and feelings of individuals and groups of children, and achievement pressures on teachers and children can be stressful and divisive; prescriptive structure and testing may work against these principles. Linked to education's humanistic purpose, the arts are another source of healing, inclusion and inspiration, as well as a natural area for indigenisation of curriculum and pedagogy both as a particular subject area and across the curriculum (see for example, Odena, 2018; Croft, 2002). Yet they are likely to be vulnerable in a context of curricular narrowing and structured pedagogy. Compared to the consensus and resources put into the *measure deficit-apply pressure-test* drive of foundational learning, IOs' engagement with pedagogies of arts and the relational nature of schooling appears as mere background noise.

The final question posed above is enormous. The trajectories of action noted in the three cases were firmly in place before the pandemic, and to a large extent before the declaration of a 'learning crisis', but the pandemic has provided a window of opportunity to solidify institutional positions, including in terms of pedagogical prescriptions. Morris et al. (2022) argue strongly that the framing of crisis by IOs is strategic, in order to impose their worldviews and agendas. However, IOs do not all work in the same way even if their agendas are remarkably aligned at the present time, and their ways of working may have legitimacy among some actors but not others. There are also many kinds of legitimacy. So I approach with caution. A post-colonial perspective would be clear on the power imbalances, neo-colonial perspectives and top-down solution building that all of these examples entail. On a philosophical level, backed up to a large extent by the evidence noted above, changes to pedagogy should be driven locally, informed by comparative evidence used by actors fully invested in the context. The ulterior motives of private actors – such as those involved in the provision of IT hardware, software and training packages – are also questioned by those who suspect that profit and embedding in the rich potential market of education systems is a significant part of the story. Some of this critique is ideological, from those who believe public education systems need to be publicly-driven and publicly-funded.

Despite these hesitations, I would, however, like to pose a direct challenge to agencies working in this space: how many of your members of staff are *bona fide* experts on pedagogy, with a fully-rounded grasp of the evidence base (evidence of all kinds from many different contexts) and of how this evidence can be operationalised meaningfully in partnership with local actors?

5. Conclusion

I am perhaps guilty in this essay of using my own inflammatory rhetoric for shock purposes, by likening the current context of pedagogical intervention by IOs in LMICs to disaster capitalism. Disaster capitalism is based on an extractive model in which profits are the main motive for actors, rather than the welfare of those who affected by disaster. Would I go that far in my calling out of disaster didacticism? No. Profit is inarguably part of the equation in relation to the technologisation of pedagogy, given that the foundations for this demand the provision of hardware, software and internet access, all of which are privatised resources captured largely by a few multi-nationals. The capture of children's identities through on-line platforms is also an area of potential profit, debate and concern (and occasionally conspiracy theory). From another site in this learning crisis landscape, there is profit to be made in private schooling and one of the bargaining chips used to attract parents to send their children to non-state schools is pedagogy that leads to improved outcomes.

However, rather than infer pure profit motives, I would argue that most of what I describe here is more about institutional path dependency – as in the definition of didactic, being fixed and unwilling to change - than it is about a desire for personal or corporate gain. On a personal level, I have never met anyone working within an IO who I did not believe to be well-intentioned and with the best interests of learners at heart. However, the World Bank, for example, because of its history, is staffed primarily by economists, including in its work in education. This perpetuates a tendency to see classrooms in universal input-output and cost-benefit terms, and a quest for measurability that bears up to scrutiny across contexts and over time. The Teach programme matches this agenda. For national governments and their bilateral aid agencies contributing to IOs, internal accountabilities to taxpayers are complemented by concerns for their external image as important and efficient aid actors, even where drastic cuts to aid jeopardise this (as in the UK). These circumscribe action and make some paths more desirable and feasible than others. A focus on joint solutions with IOs secures this internal and external reputation and image through consistency and a

[4] In some cases, foundational learning actually includes socio-emotional learning (eg World Bank, 2022a, 2022b) but in practice the primary focus in use continues to refer to literacy and numeracy.

[5] Perhaps inevitably, attention to socio-emotional learning is driving new efforts to measure it, for better or worse – but that is beyond the scope of this paper.

narrative that these things are the bedrock for all the others. Numbers help to convince. As foundational learning is more easily measured than some other kinds, a focus on it helps to sustain the evidence narrative and (hopefully) facilitate the demonstration of improvement. Equally, accounting for numbers of tablets distributed to learners also lends a helpful sense of positive action. Whether these contribute to improvement rather than just measuring it, is another question.

What would 'building back better' actually look like in my vision of pedagogy? I would start with a less stigmatising and more learner-friendly discourse. 'Sorry kids, we made a mess. Are you all right? What would building back better look like to you?' Beyond the acknowledgement and inclusion of learners' perspectives, if we look at the evidence in the round, and consider both the moral and empirical risks of top-down monolithic solutions, inevitably the need is for more locally-driven, contextualised solutions. There is an important role for IOs to support this process in a needs-driven way, but we need more than the word 'contextualised' inserted occasionally to make this happen, and we need a fuller evidence base that recognises the richness and complexity of pedagogy. Within this kind of partnership, IOs can offer cumulative evidence over time set not just in a 'what works' framework, but with attention to what works for whom and under what circumstances, and above all, what matters.

Maybe the language of crisis focuses attention, galvanises commitment, raises resources and encourages co-ordination in helpful ways. Or, maybe, it stigmatises, diverts commitment and resources from equally important agendas, and maybe that co-ordination squeezes out alternative voices and pathways or is not pulling in the best of all possible directions. Despite all the promises flowing from these solutions, from improved learning outcomes to better life chances and growing economies, the space where they will play out is in the classroom. As with the MDG's emphasis on increasing enrolment, there will be a long lag before these strategies are fully implemented and even longer before we know their effects, both intended and unintended. I hope I am wrong about the risks.

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