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SDG4 as a global governance tool and the quest for recognizing diversity – Implications emerging from the intersections between inclusive education and assessment

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A B S T R A C T

In this commentary, we venture to explore the "unity in diversity" dilemma revolving around the tension between human diversity and standardizations as it appears in the context of SDG4 and in the intersections between inclusive education and educational assessments. Since inclusive education and various forms of assessment data are at the very heart of SDG4 (Fontdevila, 2021), our argument is that the tension between diversity and standardization permeates both domains, and that there are valuable lessons to be learnt for the future administration of SDG4 from the paradoxes arising between inclusive education and assessment. The commentary concludes that greater attention to "diversity" and the finding of meaningful contextual solutions in the roll-out of standards are needed in order to avoid SDG4 turning into a global governance tool that distorts representations of success and failure in education.

1. Introduction

The diversity of people is an inherent feature of society and thus also a basic condition of any education activity. UNESCO has a long history of recognizing this condition not least reflected in its long-time slogan "unity in diversity" (UNESCO, 1947; Laves and Thomson, 1957). A salient and recurring issue, however, in the global education architecture since it first emerged after World War II is to what extent standardizations, overarching frameworks and programs as well as benchmarks and notions about 'best practice' are compatible with the diversity of people, their idiosyncrasies, cultures, and knowledge(s), as well as their experiences, goals and ambitions. The UN -driven SDG agenda, for instance, has been criticized for developing "a single set of goals for all nations, rich or poor, irrespective of their histories and cultures" (Gorur et al., 2023, para. 4). Considering this criticism, we might ask how the complexity of human diversity is handled in education today. How are the limits of what is acceptable and desirable - what is considered 'good' and 'bad' education - negotiated and determined in global, national and local education contexts?

Unpacking the notion of "unity in diversity" that celebrates difference – but only insofar as it underpins the unity of humanity, – reveals that it harbors the tension between the global and the local, the universal and the particular, and the risk that, in the name of "unity," certain norms will be proclaimed as "universal" (Elfert, 2018); i.e. that it becomes a colonizing project. This tension between the universal and the particular is recognizable on all scales of education, from the individual student's interaction with education systems, curricula and schooling contexts to national education systems' engagement with the host of education programs appearing in the contemporary global education landscape. The dilemma becomes even more complicated when considering that contemporary education is characterized by a range of actors and stakeholders - with different agendas, ideas and priorities – invested in the development of education, how education is practiced and, not least, in the measurement of students' academic progress and results.

If we zoom in on the global level, the longstanding picture emerging here is that of a narrative about education in crisis prompting a range of intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) to launch a host of programs and reports. For example, UNESCO has recently published several reports that emerged from its Futures of Education initiative, such as *Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education*, published in 2021, and *Reimagining Education*, launched in March 2022

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by UNESCO's Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development (MGIEP). The World Bank has published a report on "Realizing the Future of Learning", and the OECD runs a program on "The Future of Education and Skills 2030″, which includes "The Learning Compass 2030″ and soon also "The Teaching Compass 2030″. In addition, Edu-businesses and EdTech-businesses, philanthropic foundations and think tanks are engaging in "promissory" visions for education, predominantly promoting the digitization and some even the personalization of education drawing on notions about precision learning, personalized curricula and personalized assessment (Elfert and Ydesen, 2024; Williamson, 2020). The governing situation emerging from this complex landscape amounts to what some researchers have called multistakeholderism (Gleckman, 2018; Elfert and Ydesen, 2023).

In this commentary, we venture to explore the "unity in diversity" dilemma revolving around the tension between human diversity and standardizations as it appears in the context of SDG4 and in the intersections between inclusive education and educational assessments. Since inclusive education and various forms of assessment data are at the very heart of SDG4 (Fontdevila, 2021), our argument is that the tension between diversity and standardization permeates both domains, and that there are valuable lessons to be learnt for the future administration of SDG4 from the paradoxes arising between inclusive education and assessment. The commentary is structured according to this analytical endeavor. We start by unpacking the dilemma in SDG4 with a specific focus on the governing dimension of the modus operandi of SDG4 so far. We then move on to analyse the tensions and paradoxes emerging in the intersections between inclusive education and assessment. Finally, we will tease out the implications from our twin analysis in terms of the future administration of SDG4.

2. SDG 4—the governance implications of global datafication

Right from the outset of the SDG4 framework there have been debates around how to define quality education, and whether "this entailed a simple focus on learning outcomes or entailed free education, inclusion and contentious areas of value, like sustainability, rights and gender equality" (Unterhalter, 2019, p. 42). As the SDG4 process evolved, a shift in focus from access to learning outcomes emerged and this led to the canonization of an outcomes-focused approach to education quality (Fontdevila, 2021). Today, SDG4 hinges on a host of operationalized indicators essentially signifying the quantification of quality. Gorur (2018) as well as Fontdevila and Grek (2021) point out how a whole testing industry nourished by a demand for increased data and indicators has followed in the wake of the SDGs. In their thorough analysis of the whole SDG process, Bandola-Gill, Grek and Tichenor (2022) reveal "the ways that the SDGs, as a monitoring and governing agenda, have transformed the role of quantification, not as merely the facilitator and enabler of policy decisions taken elsewhere, but as the prime site of governing the future itself' (p. 14).

As clearly demonstrated in the annual UNESCO Global Education Monitoring reports, it is beyond doubt that education and schooling is severely challenged in many parts of the world. In these tumultuous and uncertain times, SDG4 ideally serves as a beacon from which it is possible to navigate the educational landscape and initiate improvements, achievements and advances in accordance with the education goals agreed by the UN member states. In this sense, SDG4 holds what has been termed "promissory legitimacy" because the goal becomes an indicator that a given national education system is on track to a better future (Beckert, 2020; Sobe, 2023).

The other side of the coin, however, is that the rhetoric of a "global learning crisis" creates a fear of falling behind among nation-states (Krejsler, 2019), causing them to subscribe too narrowly to global learning metrics. As argued by Benavot and Smith (2019), this development has several unintended outcomes including "the effective narrowing of the comprehensive global agenda on education (SDG 4), the

undermining of a carefully negotiated country-led process to promote lifelong education opportunities for all, the devaluing of learning that is not measurable or comparable, and the weakening of the principle of educational equity" (p. 239).

With the formation of the Global Alliance to Monitor Learning (GAML)[2] in 2016 and, more recently, the Global Education Cooperation Mechanism (GCM)[3] in 2021 aiming to boost the implementation of SDG4 by promoting the coordinated use of research evidence for policy among the large IGOs in education, by using more data, and by mobilizing more financial resources, we may have seen the preliminary culmination of this development. The new GCM is supposed to create a common data platform from which IGOs and governments can improve coordination vis-à-vis education programs and initiatives. The idea is to promote "the effective use of evidence for making appropriate policies and implementation strategies at the country level" (UNESCO, 2021). The critical implication of this, however, is the creation of a global datafication project with an unquenchable thirst for more data. This project, in turn, promotes a "managerialist vision of a comprehensible and orderly world amenable to expert control" (Auld and Morris, 2023, p. 14) and which forms a "transnational metrological field" that "legitimates a whole series of informal and ad hoc arrangements, all accepted and all approved in the name of an education crisis" (Grek, 2020, p. 161).

From a philosophy of science perspective, learning metrics of this sort convert abstract epistemological concepts into ontological entities (reification) while also claiming a considerable level of invariance in the contexts measured; otherwise, the very purpose and use of learning metrics would be futile. This point speaks to the "unity in diversity" dilemma described above in terms of the tension between diversity and standardization. The reason is that the learning metrics consisting of assessment data only provide snapshots with no regard for processes, be these inclusions, enacting quality or equality (Unterhalter, 2019). The risk is that the SDG targets become "lost in translation" to snapshot indicators (King, 2017) with the implication that "the broader meanings of inclusion, quality and equalities which had been struggled over in relation to formulating the goals and agreeing targets" (Unterhalter, 2019, p. 45) are lost. We might perhaps even update René Descartes' (1596–1650) ontological theorem *cogito, ergo sum* [I think, therefore I am] to *metitur, ergo est* [it measures, therefore it is] to establish a precise understanding of this powerful current in education today.

Thus, a critique we would like to raise in this respect is the constraint implicit in the compartmentalization that follows in the wake of the SDGs being underpinned by separate indicators. It does not allow sufficient cross-indicator or cross-issue operational space and it has profound consequences in terms of governance and in terms of determining what is acceptable and desirable in global, national and local education contexts. Inclusive education and assessment are very good examples of two important themes in education that need to be thought about in combination. This will be the topic of the next section.

3. Inclusive education and assessment

As we have seen, the governing complex of which the SDG4 is part hinges to a very large extent on learning metrics and assessment data underpinning a web of indicators. But there are other important conditions promoting the expansion of assessment technologies like tests

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[2] The Global Alliance to Monitor Learning (GAML) was established in 2016 to support the production of learning indicators and assessment tools for monitoring progress toward SDG 4 (Benavot and Smith, 2019).

[3] The Global Coordinating Mechanism (GCM) was established in 2021 with the purpose of accelerating the implementation of the education target SDG 4 by improving the coordination among IOs as well as between IOs and governments by promoting "the effective use of evidence for making appropriate policies and implementation strategies at the country level" (UNESCO, 2021)

and exams around the world. The need to determine whether students have learnt what they were supposed to has always been a part of education (Ydesen, 2023), but other more recent promoters of assessment in education are accountability and monitoring policies as well as competition and the marketization of education which have led to an increase both in International and National Large-Scale Assessments (Addey et al., 2017; Smith, 2016; Ydesen and Andreasen, 2020). Today, it could be argued that many education systems operate and develop within a Triple A triangle of Achievement, Assessment, and Accountability. The implication of this is that much energy in education is invested in the establishment of standards, measurability, and comparability via data, numbers, and metrics (Lingard et al., 2017; Pons and Maroy, 2019)—that is, the datafication of education (Hartong and Piattoeva, 2019).

Assessment is a powerful component of education because it produces hard data and because it is extensively used as a governing tool. Zooming in on the classroom and school levels, assessment to a large extent defines who is good enough and who can contribute in the right way to educational communities and the learning processes of schooling. However, at its epistemological roots, standardized assessment technologies, such as for instance a multiple-choice test, operate according to one-dimensional understandings of predefined and compartmentalized knowledge domains. Doing well on a test requires the student to develop an assessment literacy, i.e., being able to understand what the test is after in terms of good and bad answers. The need for that literacy is problematic from the perspective of student diversity. Another core feature of assessment is that it is rooted in and aimed at creating hierarchizing categorizations and taxonomies of students. In this sense, assessment has a strong impact on how students are "made" in an education context (Broadfoot, 2021). Again, this has repercussions in terms of student diversity because assessment becomes a governing technology determining what is acceptable and desirable, who is in and who is out. In other words, assessment has an impact on who or what is disdained, who or what is being problematized, and where the boundaries of acceptable otherness are, fueling the "barbaric kind of selection that school failure constitutes" (Lengrand, 1994, cited in Elfert, 2018, p. 206).

In this sense, assessment enters the premises of inclusive education. A broad definition of inclusive education tells us that it is fundamentally about universal participation in education regardless of special needs, social background, gender, ethnicity, religion, or other defining categorizations (Ydesen et al., 2022). But it is also about recognizing and appreciating that everyone is good enough, and constitutes a valuable contributor to educational communities and the learning processes of schooling. In this sense, inclusive education is fundamentally about deconstructing categorizations and the prejudices associated with such categorizations. Similar to the "unity in diversity" dilemma, the fundamental paradox arising in the intersections between inclusive education and assessment is:

- On one hand, there is a desire for students' academic progress to be measured with standardized instruments on comparable scales.
- On the other hand, there is a wish to create space for diversity and the well-being of all students.

At the same time, both assessment and inclusive education are highly dependent on cultural decisions, that is, what and who is to be assessed/included, how to assess/include, and what the implications should be in terms of policy and practice. For this reason, the paradox may look very different in different contexts. What is safe to say is that the way assessment and inclusion play out defines the "good" student, and this, therefore, has implications for the production of the "good" citizen in society.

As noted, this paradox between inclusive education and assessment resembles the "unity in diversity" paradox between human diversity and standardizations associated with the SDG4 and its current modus operandi.

4. Concluding discussion: implications for SDG 4

Much like assessment and inclusive education are legitimate and relevant concerns in any educational activity, SDG4 and the learning metrics system are seen to play a legitimate role in terms of the futures of education. The legitimacy of SDG4 arises because the goal consists of values that have been adopted by the UN member states, and the relevance of SDG4 emerges because it has the potential of creating visibility. The pitfall, however, in both of these cases is that of unwarranted reductionism when inclusive education is reduced to students' successful participation in assessment activities, or when the achievement of SDG4 is reduced to "green lights" in the web of indicators. The danger in both cases is that the allure of quantification may overrule reservations about how inclusive education or SDG4 might appear in given contexts. Neither inclusive education nor SDG4 can be achieved once and for all by following a standardized recipe. These policy agendas cannot be achieved by ticking a box. Both inclusive education and SDG4 might look very different from national context to national context, from school to school, and from classroom to classroom.

The implication is that the SDG4-related learning metrics and indicators can only serve as a starting point. The processes surrounding the realization of SDG4 will always have to be explored in given contexts in order to analyze which policies and practices actually underpin a viable, meaningful and quality version of SDG4 in the context in question.

To conduct such an analysis, it is vital to pay attention to the host of actors and stakeholders – and their different agendas, ideas and priorities – active in each education context. The reason is that the realization of SDG4 is at risk of being limited or distorted by more powerful agendas or because policymakers and practitioners try to fit SDG4 into a preexisting system that features counterproductive settings, technologies and practices.

Here the indicators might serve as a tool for identifying problems and bottlenecks, but they will never provide the answers for how to deal with them nor will they ever fully be able to capture what the implementation of SDG4 might look like on the ground. The important lesson here is that counterproductive policies and problematic recontextualizations can have detrimental and undermining effects for SDG4 at various levels of the education system from ministry to classroom.

Another peril of operating global education policy according to a global metrology is that numbers, metrics and indicators tend to work with a logic of deficiency (something can be hierarchized as better than something else) promoting a fault-finding culture around the realization of SDG4. Here we touch upon the very core of the "unity in diversity" dilemma revolving around the tension between human diversity and standardizations. A one-sided pursuit of ticking indicator boxes easily overlooks the histories and cultures of the assessed context. In that sense, the indicator-driven learning outcome system of SDG4 becomes a colonizing project and the well-intended roll-out and monitoring of SDG4 can represent an othering and alienating experience for the contexts being assessed.

An important point here is that sufficient data literacy among all levels of stakeholders involved in the rollout of SDG4 must be ensured, i. e. what are the possibilities and limitations associated with the indicators in terms of their inherent assumptions, conditions, and explanatory power? What can they be used for and what should they not be used for? In that way data literacy can help to immunize against a colonizing project.

Finally, it is important to reflect upon the norm-setting power of SDG4. Education stakeholders on various levels of the education system from global to local are positioned and configured in light of their performance regarding the realization of SDG4. Accountability instruments that "monitor countries' actions undertaken against their national commitments" (UNESCO, 2023) risk compelling countries and actors into convergence in the name of "unity" both within the countries'

education systems and vis-à-vis global standards because the goals hinge on a too narrowly defined understanding of SDG4. Greater attention to "diversity" and the finding of meaningful contextual solutions in the roll-out of standards are needed in order to avoid SDG4 turning into a global governance tool that distorts representations of success and failure in education.

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