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A Millennium Learning Goal for education post-2015: a question of outcomes or processes

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As the target year for the current Millennium Development Goal of universal completion of primary education approaches, three World Bank economists have proposed its replacement with a Millennium Learning Goal. This is part of a trend of increased privileging of learning outcomes. The proposal is assessed from the perspective of human rights-based and social justice conceptualisations of education quality. A Millennium Learning Goal may enhance information on inclusion, conceived as equal opportunity to achieve learning outcomes. However, there is a danger that it would be misused to generate high stakes tests that can be detrimental to the achievement of goals that are not readily measurable and hence to the relevance of education. It is argued that a process goal with qualitative targets for the assessment of learning, for the monitoring of educational processes and for the processes by which learning goals are determined would be more appropriate for the international level and more likely to improve education quality.

Introduction

The field of comparative education is characteristically critical towards policy homogenisation and international mechanisms of policy influence (Phillips and Ochs 2003; Steiner-Khamsi 2003). The international influences on education policy in low-income countries, orchestrated globally and leveraged through reliance on donor aid, are frequently the subject of critical examination by international and comparative researchers (Samoff 1994; King 2007; Robertson et al. 2007). The international influence on policymakers’ and practitioners’ conceptualisations and implementation of education quality, particularly at the level of basic education, has intensified in the first decade of this century. One of the chief mechanisms through which this has been achieved across sectors is the UN-ratified Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), two of which set targets for enrolments in primary and secondary education. This article critiques a proposal to replace one of these, the current MDG of universal participation in primary school, with a learning goal that would set targets for learning achievement.

The eight MDGs collectively represent not only international commitment to human development but also a system for auditing progress at the global level (Unterhalter 2005). Each is made measurable through associated quantifiable targets. Neither of the two MDGs that concern education has an associated target that explicitly mentions quality, although quality is widely recognised as essential to their achievement (UNESCO 2004). The second MDG is known as the education quality (UNESCO 2004). The second MDG is known as the education
MDG and sets a target of universal completion of primary education for all boys and girls by 2015. The third MDG, known as the gender equality MDG, has a single associated target of eradicating gender disparity in primary and secondary education by 2005 and gender disparity at all levels by 2015. Efforts to achieve the second MDG have, in many low-income countries starting from a low enrolment base, been detrimental to quality standards. In several countries, politicians, assured of external financial assistance, have made election pledges of free primary education. This has resulted in some countries that started from a low enrolment base, such as Uganda and Malawi in the mid-1990s, racing towards universalisation of access, inevitably impacting negatively on indicators of quality, such as pupil–teacher ratio and, ironically given the wording of the education MDG, completion rates (Chimombo 2009; Somerset 2009). National debate on quality, sometimes highly politicised and often with the involvement of international advocacy groups, has ensued (e.g. HakiElimu 2000; Mundy and Murphy 2001). Education researchers comparing across countries question whether rapid expansion is sustainable (Clemens 2004; Lewin 2007, 2009).

Educational economists, operating from a classical economic utilitarian paradigm, are now demonstrating the importance of the quality of education, as indicated by learning achievement, for national economic development (Hanushek and Wößmann 2007). This has led to the suggestion by three World Bank economists, Filmer, Hasan and Pritchett (2006) that as 2015 approaches, the education MDGs should be replaced by a Millennium Learning Goal (MLG). This means that the current international focus of auditing educational development in publications such as the Education for All Global Monitoring Report and the Human Development Report will shift from expansion of enrolment in primary schools to performance of an age cohort of children or young people in standardised tests.

Many educationalists would welcome the acknowledgement by eminent and influential economists that what matters is not just enrolment in school but also pupils’ learning. However, before steps are taken to formulate and implement a MLG, the likely impact on quality needs to be critically assessed. This article draws on rights-based understandings of education quality (UNICEF 2008, 2009) and conceptualisations of education quality developed from a social justice perspective to do this (Unterhalter and Brighouse 2007; Tikly and Barrett 2011; Tikly in this issue). The article divides into two main sections. The first provides background on the current MDG and the proposed MLG. It outlines how the current MDGs were formulated and the impact that national policies influenced by the MDGs have had on quality standards. The term ‘quality standards’ is used in this article to refer to levels of inputs that influence quality, such as pupil–teacher ratios, class-sizes and the availability of teaching and learning resources. The rationale behind proposing a MLG and the form of MLG that Filmer, Hasan and Pritchett have proposed is then outlined. The second section assesses the proposal for a MLG from the perspective of rights-based and social justice understandings of education quality. It starts by introducing rights-based and social justice approaches to quality, focusing on a quality framework promoted by UNICEF and their Child Friendly Schools model and three principles of quality developed by Tikly and Barrett (2011) from theories of social justice. The idea of a MLG is then assessed against three aspects of education quality, namely inclusion, relevance and democratic participation. The article concludes by proposing the form that a MLG, focused on improving learning and not just measures of learning outcomes, might take.
From MDG to MLG

Formation and critique of current MDG

Educational policy borrowing between education systems is a key area of study and theorisation in the field of comparative education (Halpin and Troyna 1995; Phillips and Ochs 2003). However, international mechanisms such as the MDGs are instrumental in generating policy homogenisation of a different order. Whilst the MDGs are global in their remit, their influence in donor countries is limited to aligning international development expenditure and activities. In aid-recipient countries they are supposed to direct high level policy-making across sectors. By 2004, more than 50 countries had a Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (Roberts 2005), which provides an overarching framework for operating the goals at country-level. A Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper is a condition of receiving World Bank loans and is seen by donor agencies as enabling coordination between multiple development partners working within a country (Robertson et al. 2007).

The current MDGs were set in the normal way by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly. Unlike past UN goals, they have enjoyed the support of the Bretton Woods institutions and their broad base of support has generated some optimism concerning their likelihood of success (Roberts 2005). However, the slow rate with which donors are fulfilling their financial pledges and the current global recession have caused some to strike a cautious note (Fukudu-Parr 2004; Othieno 2009). Easterly (2009, 26) explains that the MDGs were meant as ‘a major motivational device to increase development efforts in and on behalf of poor countries’ but at the same time are used as measures of performance at the regional and country level. Unterhalter (2005) links the measurement function of the MDGs to a shift towards audit as a form of accountability, particularly in northern democracies. They have been critiqued by Saith (2007) as ghettoising ‘development’ by locating it in the South and neglecting the interconnectedness of poverty, wealth, vulnerability and risk across the North and South (Sumner and Tiwari 2009, 835). Sumner and Tiwari (2009) note variation in the sense of ownership of the MDGs at the national level. Whilst in some countries enthusiasm for the development goal approach is such that there is evidence of a ninth local MDG being developed, in other countries there is little or no evidence of MDG ownership.

The education MDG is one of the goals with which the international community is registering some success. According to the 2010 EFA Global Monitoring Report (UNESCO 2010, 55), the number of out-of-school children in the world has dropped from 105 million in 1999 to 72 million in 2007 [although these figures are disputed (Carr-Hill 2010)]. All world regions have net enrolment ratios (NER) over 90% with the exception of Western Asia (86%) and sub-Saharan Africa (73%). However, for countries starting from a low enrolment base, rapid expansion legitimised by the education MDG, has led to low completion rates. Drawing on participation figures by age and by grade across a spectrum of countries, Lewin (2007, 2009) has demonstrated that rapid progress to high national enrolment rates can mask the fact that exclusion has not been tackled as in many countries a large number of enrolled pupils are overage for their grade and repetition and drop-out rates are still high, particularly amongst the most socio-economically disadvantaged. He also critiques the UPE goal for viewing EFA in isolation from secondary and higher educational levels, hence leading to imbalanced investment that can have implications for teacher supply and, as a result of falling transition rates to secondary, falling demand for primary
A similar criticism has been made by King (2009), who points out that such imbalanced investment fails to create conditions for sustainable development. Meanwhile, those concerned with literacy draw attention to the important role of non-formal programmes in meeting EFA goals, which are also overlooked by the MDG (Robinson 2005).

Lewin (2007) goes on to propose that targets be differentiated between countries and, for large countries even at sub-national levels, to reflect different starting points and pathways towards EFA. Calls for greater adaptation of targets have also been made with respect to the other MDGs. Sumner and Tiwari suggest that a way to do this would be to set process rather than outcome goals, which include goals for the participation of national stakeholders, including representatives of civil society, in setting more localised targets:

This might include new or different kinds of thinking related to adaptation and locally-defined development or a core of the same MDGs with a surrounding outer-ring of something new that was locally defined. (Sumner and Tiwari 2009, 842)

Proposed MLG

There is a growing concern that enrolment in school is not producing the expected learning outcomes. The EFA Global Monitoring Report 2010 (UNESCO 2010, 104–105) tells us that:

- only 17% of 16 year olds surveyed in Ghana by the Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) in 2007 scored above the international low benchmark;
- less than half of all Grade 3 students in the Dominican Republic, Ecuador and Guatemala had more than very basic reading skills according to data from the Segundo Estudio Regional Comparativo y Explicativo (SERCE) assessment published in 2008;
- the Annual Survey of Education Report 2008, produced by Pratham Resource Centre, found that just 28% of Grade 3 students in rural India could subtract two-digit numbers and only a third could tell the time.

It is these kinds of findings that prompted three economists associated with the World Bank, Filmer, Hasan and Pritchett (2006), to recommend replacing the current education MDG with a Millennium Learning Goal (MLG) post-2015. The core of their argument is that by holding countries accountable not just for enrolling children into schools but for the measurable learning outcomes that they achieve, international targets will help to ensure that education is providing young people with the skills that they will need to contribute to economic growth and human development within their countries.

Filmer, Hasan and Pritchett draw on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) to propose the form that such a MLG may take. To demonstrate how in practice a MLG could be constructed, they perform analysis of PISA data from 2003 for eight countries. They start by defining two achievement levels, a lower or threshold level of competency and a higher level. They suggest that a target could be set for the proportion of learners achieving at each level. Despite their own use of international comparative data, Filmer, Hasan and Pritchett go on to recommend that a realistic set of competencies be set at the country level or for a
group of countries. Countries grouped together then need to agree on how the desired competencies from schooling be measured. So, although their own exemplary analysis uses PISA data, they do allow that different instruments may be used for different countries.

A MLG could, therefore, set targets at the national level and would meet Lewin’s requirement of differentiation between countries with different starting points. It could be adapted to different economic development as well as educational development pathways, allowing countries to set targets for educational outcomes that will contribute most directly to their envisaged national development strategies. It can be designed to respond to the criticisms of the MDG’s exclusive focus on formal primary education by setting targets for an age cohort, rather than school grade, including those who are not enrolled in formal education or have already reached the post-primary stage. Hence, a MLG should be a step forward on the current MDG, creating a more complex agenda for international educational development that is more responsive to diversity in national contexts.

Although the specific idea of a MLG has not yet been taken up widely, there is a growing interest in international benchmarking and the measurement of learning outcomes (Barber and Mourshed 2007; Patrinos and Horn 2010). The World Bank is currently funding a research programme to develop an international benchmarking tool (World Bank 2010). Inspired by the Annual Survey of Education Report in India, the Hewlett Foundation and others, including the UK’s Department for International Development, are funding a large-scale household survey of children’s reading and mathematics performance in East Africa (Uwezo 2010). Such initiatives are indicative of a trend whereby international donors are increasingly turning to measures of learning outcomes, as opposed to measures of inputs to education, as the most meaningful indicators of quality (see also Independent Evaluation Group 2006). This trend may be welcomed as a shift from a focus on schooling to a focus on the actual learning going on in schools. However, after 50 years of mixed experiences with the UPE development goal, it seems sensible to critically interrogate the possible impact on quality of measuring learning outcomes as a global exercise. The second half of this article looks critically at the idea of a MLG and its potential impact on education quality. In order to do this, however, it is necessary to define what is meant by a good quality education. In the last 10 years, advocates of the rights-based approach to education and those concerned with social justice in and through education have kept quality on the international agenda. The next section, therefore, turns to these perspectives for a definition of education quality before considering the potential of a MLG to support and improve quality in education.

Rights-based and social justice approaches to quality

The current MDG is supported by a consensus between the Bretton Woods institutions, UN agencies and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), such as Oxfam International and Action Aid, formally allied with civil society organisations through the Global Campaign for Education (GCE) (Mundy 2007). The involvement of the UN agencies and INGOs is underpinned by their commitment to promoting and ensuring human rights (see for example, GCE 2002; Pigozzi 2008; UNICEF 2008). In contrast with the economic utilitarian perspective, the rights-based approach is very centrally concerned with the intrinsic value of education and the quality of educational processes. This is because, beyond the right to education and
aiming for outcomes of education that are instrumental to achieving other rights, the rights-based approach also encompasses the protection of children’s rights whilst they are still in education (see for example, Subrahmanian 2002; Pigozzi 2008). Tomaševski (2001), the former UN special rapporteur on the right to education, analysed international human rights legislation together with both international and domestic case history to conclude that as well as being available and accessible, children have a legal right to education of an acceptable quality and that adapts to the needs of each individual child. UNICEF (2008) promotes a framework for conceptualising what a quality primary education means for girls, which is very close to a framework published by the Global Campaign for Education (2002). This framework is centrally concerned with meeting diverse learners’ needs and as such gives special attention to Tomaševski’s fourth ‘A’ of adaptability. The framework’s five dimensions define a quality education as recognising the home and pre-school experiences of the child; providing a safe gender-sensitive environment; using relevant and inclusive curriculum and materials; using child-centred approaches that enhance girls’ learning; and resulting in outcomes for girls that are linked to national goals for education and promote positive participation in society (UNICEF 2008). The influence of this framework is apparent in the 2005 EFA Global Monitoring Report, *The Quality Imperative* (UNESCO 2004), although this is also heavily influenced by school effectiveness research (Barrett and Tikly 2010). The influence of school effectiveness research can also be seen in the quality framework developed by Pigozzi, which in its latest version has placed ‘learning’ rather than the ‘learner’ at its centre [Inter-Agency Task Team (IATT) on Education 2006; Pigozzi 2008].

Whilst UNICEF’s quality framework is directed towards an abstracted notion of ‘the (girl) learner’, the child-friendly schools model has developed out of and informs school-focused initiatives to improve quality in diverse settings, ranging from Nicaragua to Southern Sudan, Macedonia to China. The child-friendly schools model is compatible with UNICEF’s remit to promote children’s rights, including and going beyond education. Hence, the model emphasises children’s health and safety (referring to psycho-social as well as physical well-being) together with educational concerns for learning and inclusion [UNICEF 2004; United Nations Girls Education Initiative (UNGEI) 2006]. UNICEF has defined the model in terms of a set of principles, which are based upon the Convention for the Rights of the Child (UN 1989). The principle of inclusion is expressed as a ‘child-seeking school’ that ‘actively seeks out all eligible children for enrolment’ (UNICEF 2009, 9). The principle of ‘democratic participation’ means that children, parents, communities, employers, political leaders and others have a role in determining the structure content and process of education. The ‘child-centred’ principle is referred to as ‘perhaps the most important principle’ and described as making the interests of the child central to all decision-making in education (UNICEF 2009, 12). This is explicitly linked to child-centred processes of teaching and learning in which children are active agents.

The rights-based approach is important because it is rooted in established international legislation which in turn has influenced much national legislation, because of worldwide popular recognition of the rights-based discourse and because of its influence on the EFA agenda. However, it has been critiqued by academics for being conceptually and politically limited by its legal basis (Robeyns 2006; McCowan 2010). Hence, Tikly and Barrett (Tikly and Barrett 2011; Tikly in this issue) have proposed a framework founded on three dimensions of social justice defined by Fraser (1996, 2008) and informed by Sen’s capabilities approach (Sen 1999). Their
framework is of particular relevance to this article because quality is defined in terms of learning outcomes. Fraser has set out a framework for conceptualising social justice in the contemporary globalised era, making her theory an appropriate starting point for conceptualising education quality at an international level. Fraser defines social justice as ‘parity of participation’ in social life and is concerned with ‘dismantling institutionalized obstacles’ to social justice in a globalising world, in which arguments about justice often cross borders of modern territorial states (Fraser 2008, 16). So where the rights-based approach is concerned with defining entitlements and attributing concomitant responsibilities, Nancy Fraser’s social justice is concerned with social equality. She defines three dimensions of social justice. The first, redistributive justice, is concerned with justice in the domain of economics, namely the fair distribution of material resources. Tikly and Barrett relate this dimension to equity, a theme highlighted by other academics (Hawes and Stephens 1990; Sayed 1997; Nikel and Lowe 2010), defined in terms of opportunity to achieve learning outcomes. In other words, a quality basic education does not just provide access to schools for all children but provides boys and girls from all social groups with the opportunity to achieve valued learning outcomes, including those needed for secure and productive livelihoods and to contribute to peaceful and democratic societies. Tikly and Barrett call this the principle of inclusion, since it demands that educational resources be distributed between learners according to their situated needs.

The second dimension of social justice, recognition, is concerned with the socio-cultural domain and takes up the concerns of authors such as Iris Marion Young (1990) that social groups, whether defined by ethnicity, religion, gender or sexuality, have equal access to the institutions of justice. Tikly and Barrett (2011) relate this dimension to another common theme in the literature conceptualising education quality, namely relevance (Hawes and Stephens 1990; Nikel and Lowe 2010). However, Tikly and Barrett go beyond the conventional definition of relevance as a relationship between curricula and context to draw a direct line between relevance and inclusion. Relevance is understood as content, environments and processes that accommodate the culture and educational priorities of different socio-cultural groups, with an emphasis on the interests of marginalised groups. Hence, recognition in education quality also covers the concerns for meeting learners’ needs that is central to the UNICEF framework.

Fraser added to the two widely recognised dimensions of social justice a third political dimension, which she called representation and described as the underlining grammar of social justice, brought to the fore by globalisation. Representation concerns who is included in the group, which can make social justice claims of each other and who determines the institutions and processes of social justice. Fraser (2007, 253) argues that as globalisation means that the ‘chances for living good lives depend at least as much on processes that trespass the borders of territorial states as those contained within them’, the state can no longer be assumed to be the unit for thinking about claims of social justice. For Fraser, this problematises questions of representation, who is eligible to make social justice claims of whom and who determines the structures and processes through which those claims are made. Tikly and Barrett (2011) relate this dimension to the processes by which learning outcomes for education are defined and to the practice of accountability within education systems. Hence, processes for defining valued learning goals should be open and democratic, involving learners, parents, employers and civil society organisations as well as governments. Democratic participation in education underwrites inclusion and relevance by addressing the processes
by which learning outcomes are established within a given context or system. In addition, governance in education should be transparent with functioning mechanisms for accountability at every level. Nikel and Lowe (2010), drawing on the Global Campaign for Education (2002) framework, refer to this as responsiveness. This principle of democratic participation speaks to the concerns raised by Pigozzi (2008), when she sets requirements of transparency and participation on educational policy formulation, the design and management of educational institutions and determination of learning outcomes. Alexander (2008, 9) also asserts that defining aims and relevant content for public education systems ‘is eminently and necessarily a matter for debate’.

**MLG as a measure of inclusion**

The remainder of this article assesses the potential of a Millennium Learning Goal to address quality as it is constructed within rights-based and social justice approaches. It starts by asking what extra information a MLG will give on inclusion over and above that provided by the current MDG. As a principle of quality highlighted across rights-based and social justice frameworks, inclusion turns issues of access, sometimes conceptualised as an input to educational systems, into an educational process of actively seeking out eligible children for enrolment, implying engagement with communities and parents. Tikly and Barrett’s (2011) definition of inclusion is concerned not only with access to education but also access to the benefits of education. They argue that good quality education systems allocate resources differentially according to the needs of the individual learner within his or her context. Hence, additional resources may well be allocated to a child with a physical disability, a child who has suffered emotional trauma or a child living in a household that is chronically poor, so that he or she has the same opportunity to achieve learning outcomes as a child unaffected by these forms of disadvantage. This definition implies that learning outcomes are an important indicator of inclusion, as are progression rates from basic into post-basic education. A MLG, therefore, would provide extra information on progress with respect to inclusion. It would not, however, preclude the need for information on access to educational institutions in country contexts where substantial numbers of children and adults are still excluded from basic education altogether [as highlighted in the most recent Education for All Global Monitoring Report UNESCO (2010)].

Economists working within a human capital perspective tend to view outcomes in terms of skills and benefits for future life and some of these, such as literacy, mathematical skills and knowledge about health may be measured using standardised tests. However, other valued outcomes from education are less amenable to quantifiable measurement. Arguing from a social justice position informed by both the primary goods and capabilities approaches, Unterhalter and Brighouse (2007) identify three types of benefits of education, namely instrumental, positional and intrinsic. Positional benefits relate to how successful an educated person is relative to others and include certification, the reputation and location of one’s school, who one attends school with, how well teachers in a school transmit ‘cultural capital’, and how far new meanings of gender or race have been developed. Intrinsic benefits are explained as follows:

The educated person might have a more rewarding and complex mental life than she had before being educated, regardless of whether the education helps her gain or keep employment. (Unterhalter and Brighouse 2007, 80)
The human rights approach is concerned with intrinsic benefits to the extent that it is concerned with the promotion or protection of children’s rights within, as well as through, education. Hawes and Stephens (1990, 14) were referring to intrinsic benefits when they argued that “quality of life” is not just for adults. A child has as much right to enjoy the time he is in school as an adult has to enjoy work and leisure. McCowan considers instrumental, positional and intrinsic benefits of education to be so important that he proposes the right to education be elaborated into two separate rights that encompass all three:

1. The right to engage in educational processes that are both intrinsically and instrumentally valuable, and that embody respect for human rights.
2. The right of access to educational institutions and experiences that confer positional advantage. (McCowan 2010)

A MLG with quantifiable targets focused on acquiring basic skills, would overlook those intrinsic, positional and instrumental benefits that are not readily quantifiable. A MLG that also has targets for qualitative indicators of a broader range of learning outcomes would be harder to monitor but may do more to promote inclusion in terms of access to a broad and balanced range of learning outcomes. This is demonstrated by experiences with high stakes testing in the Anglophone Western world. Goldstein (2004) refers to the examples of England and the state of Texas in the USA, where standardised testing was introduced as a means of auditing the quality of schools, with repercussions for schools and teachers whose pupils under-performed in the tests. In both places, pupil performances in the tests did improve. However, in England there were reports of de-motivated pupils, increased test anxiety amongst low achievers, and constrained teacher professionalism and capacity for creative innovation. In Texas, cross-state research concluded that the concentration on preparation for state tests hindered all round development of mathematics and reading skills.

The distorting influence of high stakes testing is even more apparent in low-income countries where highly competitive end-of-cycle examinations select for the next level of education (Barrett 2009). This has contributed to what Ronald Dore (1976) memorably dubbed ‘the diploma disease’, whereby the search for certification becomes the tail that wags the dog of education. Schools are ranked and their quality judged according to the proportion of pupils that progress to the next educational level. Consequently, practices that are believed to raise examination scores but erode the intrinsic benefits of education have become widespread. Students sit through long school days focused on preparing for examinations and private tuition cuts into children and young people’s leisure time outside of school. Meanwhile, in the foundational early years of primary, pupils cram into sparsely furnished classrooms without a teacher or with an unqualified teacher, because their schools choose to focus resources on the examination year groups.

The measurement of learning outcomes is never just neutral measurement of learning but is always a part of the learning experience and inevitably impacts on pedagogic processes. In the field of language learning the influence that assessment exerts on teacher and learner behaviour and even on policy has come to be known as ‘washback’ (see for example, Shohamy, Donitsa-Schmidt and Ferman 1996; Rea-Dickins and Scott 2007). At its best, assessment is formative, an essential and integrated part of planned classroom learning. Ill-conceived tests, however, are detrimental to the very thing they are supposed to measure, education quality. What evidence there is
from low-income countries suggests that summative national examinations are very often poorly designed and part of the quality problem in education (Rea-Dickins, Yu and Afitska 2009). A MLG focused exclusively on the learner performance in standardised tests may exacerbate washback in low-income countries. A more useful MLG would broaden the focus from the results of assessment to also encompass means or assessment. Such a MLG would have associated targets for the design and practice of international and national assessment that is fair and supportive of learning across all curriculum areas. It would also have targets for the management, analysis and dissemination of information on learning outcomes, so that groups of learners who are being excluded from the benefits of education can be identified.

**A MLG and relevance**

Filmer, Hasan and Pritchett (2006) use the PISA survey to illustrate the feasibility and merits of a MLG. As an international comparison of quality, much effort is invested in designing the tests used in PISA so that they cover skills and knowledge that are generic to all national curricula and so that they are ‘culturally’ neutral. Yet, the extent to which this is possible or desirable is still a matter for debate. Goldstein (2004), in a critique of the EFA literacy target points, observes that:

If a measuring instrument is restricted only to those items for which we might assume there are no locally specific differences, there is then a real question about whether such an instrument is measuring anything useful. (Goldstein 2004, 9)

Different countries have different comparative advantages within the global economy and have therefore planned for different development pathways. The skills that will extend capabilities, enhance wellbeing, contribute to national development and participation in the global economy will therefore be different, most especially at the post-basic level. For a MLG to promote relevance therefore, targets would have to be set at the national level, as Filmer, Hasan and Pritchett (2006) suggest, and in large countries, possibly at a sub-national level also.

Relevance, however, does not just concern outcomes but also processes. As relevance also refers to the recognition of learners’ multiple socio-cultural identities, it demands that school processes and the intrinsic benefits of education are responsive to these identities. For example, Ahlquist and Hickling-Hudson (2004) show how school processes may recognise or overlook the histories, identities and cultural practices of indigenous groups with implications for children’s engagement in learning. Tshireletso (1997) observed parents from indigenous minority groups in Botswana disowning schools that have practices counter to their own cultural values, such as the use of corporal punishment. The choice of language of instruction is one powerful way in which education systems either recognise or diminish the ethnic and/or linguistic identity of learners. Recent research has drawn attention to the gendered experiences of girls and boys in schools, including the sexual harassment of girls in particular (e.g. Leach et al. 2003), with implications for the formation of their gendered identities and emerging sexual identities. Measuring learning outcomes tells us very little about how schools respond to and influence learners’ socio-cultural identities. As Alexander (2008) has forcefully observed, quantifiable measures of quality are always partial as some aspects of educational processes can only be judged through observation against qualitative indicators (see also O’Sullivan 2006). The observation and judgement of processes is the complex work of school inspectorates.
Comparative Education

and other educational supervisors and managers that international targets are too blunt an instrument to tackle. There is a very real danger that a MLG composed of reduct-

tionist quantifiable targets will undermine quality of education if it becomes the main criterion by which governments are held to account on the international stage. However, just as a broader reconceptualised MLG could have a target for the processes of assessment it could also have a qualitative target for the processes of monitoring quality, requiring that education systems have functioning inspectorates or systems of school supervision that promote quality educational processes.

**Participation in determining learning goals**

Unterhalter and Brighouse (2007) list eight areas that should be measured for a greater understanding of EFA. Four of these are related in some way to public discussion on the content and form of education and throughout the list the diversity of social groups is recognised. As seen above, the participation of children, parents, communities, employers and political leaders is also included within the UNICEF child-friendly schools model, as the ‘principle of democracy’ (UNICEF 2009). Democracy in Tikly and Barrett’s framework underpins inclusion and relevance. Viewing democratic participation in debating and making decisions about educational goals, processes and content as a fundamental principle of quality, places the debate on education quality in a new light (Barrett 2011). Far from being subsumed by a MLG, as Filmer, Hasan and Pritchett suggest, debate on education quality should be integral to the process of formulating a post-2015 goal on education. Education is a value based, contextually and culturally contingent activity and as such, the goals of education should always be subject to review and debate at all levels, from local up to international. The need for debate cannot be displaced by technical measurement but rather technical measurement should aim to serve debate, through providing information on what is valued. The argument that Shepherd puts forward for increased public debate and national ownership of the MDGs is also specifically relevant to a MLG:

Global goals are all well and good, but countries need to be able to set their own targets. What is important is a vibrant public debate about progress, informed by indicators that are backed by solid data. (Shepherd 2008, 1)

**Conclusion – process goals for education**

Fifteen years is too long to wait for a marginal improvement in the education MDG and so, the opportunity of 2015 should be met with a response that will support the improvement of education quality for all in all countries and most especially education quality for social groups that are currently excluded from the benefits of education. Alexander (2008) suggests that indicators at each level of an education system should focus on the work of those at that level. Extending this to the international level suggests that future MDGs should be focused on the international work of holding governments accountable for provision of an education of acceptable quality for all and supporting governments in their efforts to provide education for all within their borders. The suggestions made by researchers in the field of development studies that the MDGs be replaced by process goals, point the way forward for an education MDG or MLG. A MLG that promotes education quality would have to do more than set quantitative targets for achievement in standardised tests, indeed it is questionable
whether such targets should form part of a MLG given the potential for harmful washback effects. A MLG focused on processes rather than outcomes would set targets in terms of qualitative indicators. This would mean that their achievement will be a matter of professional judgement and therefore subject to contestation. Whilst this may be frustrating for those attempting to audit progress against the MLG, such debate should be welcomed as a necessary and important feature of good quality education systems.

So what form would such a MLG take? It would not be framed in terms of achievement in tests as Filmer, Hasan and Pritchett suggest but rather in terms of learning. The arguments in this article suggest it would aim for all children everywhere to participate in learning that is inclusive, relevant and democratic. It would have associated targets for inclusion, including quantitative targets for participation in different educational levels and non-formal education programmes set at the national level. It would have a process target for national assessment tools and practices, requiring them to be fair and supportive of learning. It would include process targets for inspection systems, requiring functioning inspection systems that are effective in monitoring and improving educational processes so as to ensure education has both instrumental and intrinsic benefits for learners. To ensure relevance, such a MLG would require that learning outcomes and pedagogic processes are the subject of open public and professional debate. Whilst all these targets could be set in general terms at the global level, associated indicators can only be identified at the national level. Most importantly, however, the goal itself should be formulated through open debate between the representatives of nation states, NGOs and civil society organisations. Further, its associated national targets should be the subject of open democratic debate, including the voice of educational professionals and children, at the national and local level.

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