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Education for what? Human capital, human rights, and protection discourses in the COVID-19 response

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The rallying cry of global actors working on education during COVID-19 has been that the pandemic poses a grave threat to ensuring equitable and inclusive access to high quality education for all children and adolescents, grounding the response firmly in the domain of global commitments embodied in Sustainable Development Goal 4, as well as prior commitments to education for all. However, while the idea of a global goal signifies cohesion around a shared set of ideals and actions, the meaning of these global commitments is contested terrain. It is just this terrain—alongside other cultural, political, and economic forces—that has the potential to affect national education responses to COVID-19, as well as the meaning of education writ large. This article explores three discourses—Education for Human Capital, Education as a Human Right, and Education for Protection—during COVID-19, demonstrating the way the idea of a collective response to the pandemic masks deep ideological difference between global actors. The article traces the evolution of these discourses in education in development and education in emergencies, situating them within broader cultural, political, and economic phenomena. This history is used to ground an analysis of the discourses within the COVID-19 education response and raises questions about the impacts these discourses may have on national education systems and education writ large during and beyond the pandemic.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19, discourse, education for all, education in development, education in emergencies, human capital, human rights, child protection

Introduction

With Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, the world committed to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” ([United Nations Division for Sustainable Development Goals, 2015](https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/goals/)). However, since the post-World War II (WWII) era, there has been no global agreement on the meaning of that commitment. Instead, there have been moments of discord, tied to significant political, economic, and social events, in which global education actors have debated the meaning

of providing education for all, competing for dominance of major paradigms that specify the form and function of education for individuals and societies. The contestation about what it means to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education continues today. In this article, I argue that COVID-19 has provided yet another arena for this debate, which will—in tandem with other cultural, political, and economic forces—shape not only national education responses to COVID-19, but the meaning of education writ large. In fact, that is the explicit intention of many of these global actors, who view the pandemic not only as a challenge, but as an opportunity to ‘build back better’:

... the planning for a better future has to start now. Even as systems cope with school closures, they need to start planning how to manage continuity when schools reopen and how to improve and accelerate learning. The guiding principle should be to use every opportunity, in each phase, to do things better. By learning from innovations and emergency processes, systems can adapt and scale up the more effective solutions. In doing so, they could become more effective, more agile, and more resilient. A vision and proactive action will help not only mitigate the damage from the current crisis, but could turn recovery into real growth. Societies have a real opportunity to “build back better.” They should seize it. (World Bank Group, 2020, p. 7)

Both historically and in the COVID-19 era, within these debates, at least three major discourses that specify the meaning of this commitment are present. The first is that of education for the development of human capital. According to this discourse, access to education and learning for all is a means of developing individuals’ earning power and productivity, to support economic growth and stability (Robeyns, 2006; Tikly and Barrett, 2011). Always providing a strong counterargument to the human capital discourse, the human rights approach to education maintains that all young people have a right to access high-quality education and learn, and that governments and the global community have the moral and legal responsibility to uphold that right (Robeyns, 2006; McCowan, 2011; Tikly and Barrett, 2011). A third discourse, also rooted in a human rights approach, emerged with the recognition that a large proportion of the world’s out-of-school children and youth live in conflict-affected areas and that education itself is a humanitarian intervention that can be lifesaving, and claims that education is a means to ensuring all children’s rights to safety and protection (Winthrop and Matsui, 2013; Lerch, 2017; Lopes Cardozo and Novelli, 2018).

In this article, I bring together these three discourses to begin to understand how COVID-19, like other political, economic, and social moments before it, is acting as an arena for contestation over what it means to provide education for all. To do so, first, I trace the evolution of these discourses since the end of WWII by framing them in relation to five discursive moments. Then, I outline how education is framed within these discourses during the COVID-19 pandemic by five prominent global education

actors—UNESCO, the World Bank, UNICEF, the Interagency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE), and Save the Children—highlighting points of convergence and divergence. Finally, I pose some possible scenarios that could emerge as a result of the current moment of COVID-19 and pose the question: what is it that we want education to be during COVID-19 and beyond?

Ontological and methodological considerations

This paper is fundamentally about how cultural, political, and economic processes affect issues in education. Based in a Globally Structured Agenda for Education (GSAE) approach, developed by Roger Dale and colleagues, I explore the “social and economic forces operating supranationally and transnationally... to elude, break down, or override national boundaries...” and that have “effects on national educational systems, even as they are also locally mediated” (Dale, 2000, p. 428). Proponents of a GSAE approach aim to understand how supranational (i.e., regional, global) actors, agendas and interests play a role in national education policies and practices, and how structures and mechanisms at multiple scales (e.g., local, national, regional, global) intersect and interact to shape and influence the ‘education ensemble’ (Robertson and Dale, 2015). With a rising multilateralism post-WWII and increasingly thickening global governance as a result of unprecedented levels of globalization (Robertson et al., 2007), it is all the more critical to understand how supranational education actors are influencing education agendas within nation-states, including in their COVID-19 responses.

The GSAE approach highlights four sets of “education questions” that help to interrogate four analytically distinct though not discrete moments, which help to understand the multiscale forces at play in the education ensemble (Dale, 2000, 2005; Robertson and Dale, 2015, p. 156–157). In the first, the *moment of educational practice*, the education questions help us to understand who is taught what by whom and to what effect, linking to other contextual factors that contribute to those circumstances. Second, the *moment of education politics* asks about the relationship between policy and practice, including who gets to make policy decisions. In the third, as explained by Robertson and Dale (2015):

“the moment of the *politics of education* is fundamentally concerned with both political-economic structures, and deeply embedded cultural/civilizational/national structures and discourses, with individuals and institutions occupying varying positions in those social structures dependent on the conditions at play... [The politics of education] is where we find the kinds of ‘rules of the game’ or ‘paradigmatic setting’ that both promote and set basic limits to what is considered possible and desirable from education” (p. 156).

Lastly, the *moment of education outcomes* explores the immediate consequences of education policies, practices, and politics, as well as those outcomes in the wider context of individuals', families', communities', and societies' experiences. This paper is particularly concerned with the moment of the *politics of education*—specifically, looking at the range of global discourses that promote specific forms and functions of education in the COVID-19 response and beyond, and that have material effects on the other three moments—education practice, policy, and outcomes.

My argument is also based on the reasoning that discourse is one way that the supranational influences national education policy, alongside other cultural, political, and economic elements of social life. I understand discourse as the materiality of language, talk, and text, which is one part of social life closely connected with other parts (Van Dijk, 2009). But also, building on the work of several prominent discourse analysts (e.g., Gee, 1999; Fairclough, 2003; Van Dijk, 2009), I recognize that the term can also be used to refer to specific discourses (e.g., the Education for Human Capital discourse, the Education as a Human Right discourse, the Education for Protection discourse), meaning a pattern or trend within the materiality of meaning systems that convey—in the case of my paper—a specific set of beliefs and values about the purpose of education and, therefore, what education should look like in practice, policy, and outcomes. It is this latter use of the concept of discourse that I use in this paper.

I situate my work within a cultural political economy (CPE) tradition (Jones, 2010; Robertson and Dale, 2015), in which the “study of the cultural... is the study of discourse (language, meaning, symbol, rhetoric, persuasion, and so on) in its dialectical internal relations with institutions (their rituals, material practices, opportunities, constraints, and so on), the actors within them (beliefs, values, and desires), and their economic context” and that “...the focus for cultural research is very much on the processes and practices by which discourse is produced, contested, modified, and promoted and on the institutions, actors, and agents where this takes place” (Jones, 2010, p. 27–28). Analyzing discourse is important in social analysis, alongside other forms of social analysis (Fairclough, 2003), because it plays a fundamental role in the development of education policy (Sayed and Moriarty, 2020), practice, and outcomes, including during the COVID-19 response.

Gee (1999) describes the ‘chicken and egg’ situation between language and the material world in which he explains that it is simultaneously true that our social world sets the stage for and creates the language we use, and also that language itself shapes and influences our social world. It is noteworthy that in the first half of the paper, I describe the emergence and evolution of the discourses—in other words, how the discourses *came to be*, as an effect of historical and contemporary social, political, and economic events, actors, and institutions, and how they have been shaped and have evolved over time. However, in the second half of the paper, I shift how I talk about the discourses to describe what the discourses ‘say’, what meaning and values they convey.

This shift is intentional and aligns with a critical realist ontological position (Fairclough and Jessop, 2010) that underpins CPE, in that the discourses themselves become real ‘things’ that have material effects on the social world. As Dale (2000) argues, “recognizing how globalization might affect national education policies and practices involves three things: appreciating and specifying the nature and force of the extranational effect; specifying what it is that may be affected, in this case “education,” and what forms those changes may take; and how that effect occurs, whether directly, in traceable ways indirectly, or consequentially on other changes it may bring about within or on the education sector” (p. 427). The purpose of this article is to set out the nature of the supranational—specifically, the supranational discourses—and interrogate how they came to be in order to understand what they might effect for learners, teachers, families, and education systems.

Methods

This article is based on a larger study examining dominant discourses in the global COVID-19 education response. In the study, I conducted a review of the literature on global governance of education, as well as a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021) of 10 policy guidance documents that aim to influence national COVID-19 education responses in developing and crisis-affected contexts published by UNESCO (2020a,b), The World Bank (2019), UNICEF (Muroga et al., 2020), INEE (The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action and Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies, 2020), and Save the Children (2020), as well as several documents developed jointly by these actors and others (Save the Children et al., 2020; UNESCO et al., 2020a,b,c).

I selected these documents by conducting a thorough mapping of over 200 documents providing COVID-19 policy guidance, evidence, and tools published on several significant COVID-19 and education repositories, including by INEE, UNESCO, and the World Bank, and snowballing to locate additional resources. Based on a preliminary review of the documents and literature review of the global governance of education, I limited my sample to documents published by UNESCO, the World Bank, UNICEF, INEE, and Save the Children given both their influence throughout the evolution of the education in development and education in emergencies fields and their prominence in the COVID-19 global response, resulting in 78 documents providing policy guidance, evidence, and tools. I ultimately included the 10 policy guidance documents directed at national education stakeholders because those most clearly articulated the justificatory narratives about the form and function education should take during and after COVID-19.

In this paper, I use three major discourses in education in the development and humanitarian sectors—which I call Education for Human Capital, Education as a Human Right, and Education for Protection—to frame my analysis. These discourses (also considered models, approaches, or paradigms by some

researchers) have been identified and described in substantial literature critiquing the history and evolution of these two fields and the justificatory narratives that underpin policy and action within it (e.g., Robeyns, 2006; McCowan, 2011; Tikly and Barrett, 2011; Novelli, 2013; Lopes Cardozo and Novelli, 2018). I identified these three discourses using a mixed inductive and deductive approach in which I iterated between reading the 10 documents in my sample and the literature on discourses in the global governance of education in development and education in emergencies. Iterating between the sample documents and the literature on global governance led me to identifying and describing the three discourses in the COVID-19 response, and how they are constructed through four major themes—access, learning, protection, and equity.

After identifying the discourses and themes, I carried out a first round of coding of the themes and discourses, allowing me to develop thorough descriptions of each code. Then, I conducted a second round of coding to categorize the relationship between the themes within each of the discourses (e.g., protection affects access; access affects learning). Using this thematic analysis, I then reconstructed the discourses in my analysis below, and interpreted my findings by using a set of questions adapted from Bacchi and Goodwin's (2016) *What's the Problem Represented to Be (WPR)* approach: (1) What's the problem of COVID-19 related school closures represented to be by this discourse? (2) What deep-seated assumptions underly this discourse? (3) How has the problem representation of this discourse come to be, i.e., what cultural, political, and economic factors have led to the construction of this problem representation?

Five discursive 'moments'

Global commitments to ensuring education for all have had, since early days, diverse motives (McCowan, 2011). As aptly described by Coleman and Jones (2005, p. 22), "never far from the practice of politics, education invites controversy over its objectives, rationales, processes and outcomes." In this section, I trace three discourses—Education for Human Capital, Education as a Human Right, and Education for Protection—through the history of the education in development and education in emergencies subsectors since the post-WWII era, framing them in relation to five discursive 'moments' that have given rise to or significantly altered the trajectory of debates about what it means to guarantee education for all.

First, with the end of WWII, nations around the globe committed to providing access to education for all. These early commitments espoused several discourses about education and development that asserted education as a means of ensuring global stability, economic growth, and social development, and, shortly thereafter, as a human right. These discourses emerged within the context of significant global political and economic shifts largely attributable to the end of WWII. The post-WWII era marked the beginning of a new

wave of rising multilateralism in development, including in education (Robertson et al., 2007). Western states began to view expanding public education as essential to the functioning and stability of an international world system. Education was also seen as essential for statehood and building inclusive national economies and establishing lasting peace and a well-functioning international world system based on shared values of individual freedoms and collective prosperity (Chabbott, 2002; Coleman and Jones, 2005; Mundy and Ghali, 2009; McCowan, 2011).

Though not always certain that education would be included in global structures of multilateralism (Coleman and Jones, 2005), education was eventually inserted into the global agenda in Article 55 of the UN Charter. However, by the time of the establishment of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)—the first intergovernmental agency with an educational mandate, which had its aim to support "full and equal opportunities for education for all" (United Nations, 1945)—there was widespread agreement on the need for an agency that would promote science, education, and cultural understanding (Chabbott, 2002). While UNESCO's charter stopped short of declaring education a human right (Coleman and Jones, 2005), by 1948, the idea of education for all was fortified in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 26, which was followed by the establishment of several conventions and organizations tasked with upholding that right. The inclusion of education in these global commitments was, in large part, influenced by non-governmental transnational actors, including NGOs, teachers' organizations, and networks of progressive educators (Coleman and Jones, 2005; Mundy and Ghali, 2009).

Within the context of a growing international development discourse (Chabbott, 2002; Robertson et al., 2007), education emerged as a loosely defined area for policy activity. On the one hand, there was growing demand for universal primary education from newly independent nation states. On the other, prioritizing 'comprehensive economic planning,' UNESCO and its advisors urged developing countries to prioritize developing skilled labor. Still, to meet continued popular demand, UNESCO and other international organizations encouraged the development of community-based 'fundamental' education (Chabbott, 2002).

At the same time nation states and international organizations had competing views about how to define education as a forum for international policy engagement, UNESCO became highly politicized due to its governance structures, which gave equal power to all member states. This, along with increasing Cold-War era tensions, created space for several other multilaterals organizations to expand their mandate to include education policy influencing. The most active international policy actors in education in developing countries were those focused on international development—UNICEF, the World Bank, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and several bilateral development agencies (Mundy and Ghali, 2009).

These organizations had diverse interests in education and appeared to be competitors as much as collaborators. While UNESCO's charter was vague, the agency's promotion of universal schooling and literacy largely supported human rights objectives (Coleman and Jones, 2005). In contrast, UNICEF and the World Bank's entrance into the policy arena of education in the 1960s was more connected to economic justifications for education (Coleman and Jones, 2005). UNICEF, which expanded its focus to include education in 1960, spearheaded efforts to target the poorest and most marginalized children (Phillips, 1987; Mundy et al., 2016), putting national development efforts at the fore (Coleman and Jones, 2005). This would later shift with significant lobbying efforts of non-governmental organizations influencing UNICEF to adopt an explicitly human rights-based approach (Coleman and Jones, 2005). In contrast, the World Bank, which broadened its mandate to education after 1963, has always deployed a human capital approach, which characterizes investment in education a means for economic growth (Robertson et al., 2007; Mundy and Ghali, 2009), even while it has sometimes accommodated human rights language (Coleman and Jones, 2005). With this rationale, the World Bank especially promoted vocational training and technical education, which stood in contrast to UNESCO's focus on the individual and a more balanced education (Robertson et al., 2007). Likewise, the OECD, with a mandate on economic growth and development in Western states, facilitated cross-national education policy information sharing and learning among Western states after including education in its policy focus in 1968 (Mundy and Ghali, 2009).

Second, as the Cold War advanced from the 1960s through the 1980s, a discourse of education for the development of human capital became increasingly dominant. According to this discourse, access to education for all became more and more connected to economic growth and human capital (Mundy and Ghali, 2009). The case for a relationship between education and economic development first emerged in the 1960s in the form of human capital theory. According to the argument, education is an investment that could yield high returns to individuals and to national economies (Chabbot, 2002; Robertson et al., 2007). With deteriorating confidence about expanding UNESCO's role, the idea that education could be used as a tool for development of postcolonial states was promoted by the World Bank, OECD, and many bilateral aid agencies (Mundy and Manion, 2014). As a result, focus on mass formal schooling at a primary level waned in favor of technical training, adult education, and vocationally oriented functional training, despite some regional conferences and commitments to universal primary education. Still, in the 1960s, even UNESCO shifted towards a more economy-centric model, which prioritized 'functional literacy,' intended to contribute directly to worker productivity (Chabbot, 2002).

Despite continued pressure of some entities on providing universal primary education or Freirian popular education throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the debt crisis and austerity measures of the 1970s and 1980s strengthened interest in efficiency in education and development of human resources

(Chabbot, 2002). With spiraling debt of low-income countries, the World Bank and the IMF introduced a series of Structural Adjustment Policies (SAP)—later known as the Washington Consensus—to borrowing countries, which linked loans to conditionalities related to fiscal austerity, deregulating the economy, and opening it up to international competition (Robertson et al., 2007). In education, the World Bank, which had initially looked to UNESCO for direction in their education strategy, became more determined to take its own path, focusing on basic education, productivity, rates of return analysis, maximizing efficiency, building institutional capacity, and promoting the linkage between education and economic development (Robertson et al., 2007). By the 1990s, the World Bank was the single biggest funder to education in developing countries, and its influence superseded that of UNESCO, UNICEF, and others (Mundy and Ghali, 2009; Mundy and Manion, 2014; Mundy et al., 2016).

The World Bank's approach differed markedly from early education for all activities, introducing neoliberal reforms such as decentralization, standardized testing, and privatization (Robertson et al., 2007; Mundy and Ghali, 2009; Rowell, 2020). Likewise, the OECD gained increasing prominence in the 1980s and 1990s as the main cross-national research and statistics organization, using statistical ranking and standardized testing to further embed the neoliberal ideas about educational reform in the context of economic globalization (Mundy and Ghali, 2009). While it is difficult to discern the exact effects that these neoliberal reforms had on education (Bonai, 2002), the literature suggests that SAPs had a profound effect on governance (towards greater power of international organizations), expenditure (generally a decrease in spending; introduction of efficiency measures; shift towards financial prioritization of higher education from basic education), provision (from public towards private), access and quality (increasing dropout rates and decreasing quality), and equity (growing gender gaps) (Robertson et al., 2007).

Despite the general trend towards a human capital paradigm in education, some actors continued to push a human rights and equity agenda. UNESCO held a series of regional conferences on expansion of universal primary education and adult literacy from late 1960s and 1970s, though its reach was limited due to underfunding (Mundy, 2007). UNICEF, in the 1980s, continued to be a key driver of debates about the role of governments ensuring the rights of poor and vulnerable children (Rowell, 2020), and in the 1990s embraced a new focus on children's rights to education (Mundy et al., 2016). This was paralleled in the 1980s and 1990s by the development of the Human Development Index and increased recognition by the global community of the need to include more children, particularly girls, women, and ethnic minorities, in education (Chabbot, 2002). The 1990s also saw an explosion of policy activity of transnational advocacy networks, international non-governmental organizations (NGO), and new foundations who pushed leading international organizations, such as the World Bank, OECD, UNICEF, and UNESCO, to focus on issues

of equity and equality (Robertson et al., 2007; Mundy and Ghali, 2009; Mundy and Manion, 2014).

Third, the 1990 World Conference on Education for All (EFA) held in Jomtien, Thailand—as well as further commitments to EFA embodied in the Dakar Framework for Action and the Millennium Development Goals—served as arenas for continued debate about the purpose and objectives of education, but can be viewed as a reaffirmation of education as a human right (Rowell, 2020). With the collapse of the Soviet Union, increasing globalization and tendency towards neoliberalism, aid to developing countries waned in the 1990s, but at the same time there was a shift in development priorities to least developed countries and marginalized population groups (Lopes Cardozo and Novelli, 2018). With significant critiques leveraged against the Washington Consensus and the international financial institutions that backed it for undermining the capacity of low-income countries to ensure stability, social welfare, and meet the needs of the most vulnerable, the ‘Good Governance’ agenda (or Post-Washington Consensus) was born. While the agenda did not entirely divorce itself from the Washington Consensus, it broadened the scope to include social reforms, in a social-market approach that acknowledged the inequalities produced by the Washington Consensus (Robertson et al., 2007). Several important factors contributed to this shift in the development agenda—the fall of the Cold War, collapse of communist regimes, and victory of capitalism; the recognition of the failures of the SAPs and the pressure put on them by the proliferation of NGOs; and the success of newly industrialized countries in Asia, which pointed to alternatives to a market-driven model (Robertson et al., 2007).

Prioritization of primary education was central to reducing poverty in the Post-Washington era. While that was largely driven by rates of return analyses, the push for universal primary education that emerged during that period represented more an international responsibility necessitating increased funding than restructuring of education, cost recovery, and privatization from the Washington Consensus era (Robertson et al., 2007). Bridging both the Washington Consensus and Good Governance periods, as well as the narrow economic justification and broader social welfare view of education, the World Conference on EFA was born by the heads of UNESCO, the World Bank, and UNICEF, each with different motives and perspectives: UNESCO with an eye on mass adult education and self-interest of overcoming organizational and political challenges, the World Bank with the view of education as a means for social and economic development and motivation to generate revenue to continue to finance their education activities, and UNICEF with the view of education as a key to achieving health for all children (Chabbott, 2002). As illustrated in the preamble to the World Declaration on EFA, the movement reaffirmed commitments to ensuring the universal right to schooling set out in the Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The declaration then goes on to prioritize the ‘basic learning needs’ of the millions of children whose needs were neglected by the current schooling system, while providing only modest assertions of the connections

between education and development (Chabbott, 2002). Meeting basic learning needs was hoped to be achieved by reprioritizing universal and equitable access to education, among other focuses, prioritizing girls, women, children with disabilities, minorities, and others traditionally left out of schooling (Chabbott, 2002). The declaration also illustrates that education had become viewed as more than schooling, knowledge, and skills (Robertson et al., 2007).

Although progress towards EFA through the 1990s was notably slow and uneven, and even considered by its own EFA Forum as a failure (Skilbeck, 2000), EFA was intended to renew a global commitment to ensuring the education as a human right, as well as an expanded vision of what education entails. EFA reached policy consensus and outlined future directions to raise the level of educational attainment and guarantee the right to education for all (Rowell, 2020). Moreover, it was viewed by some as the closest the ‘left-leaning’ organizations of the UN and the ‘right-leaning’ Bretton Woods organizations (the World Bank and the IMF) had come in accommodating one another’s views (Therien, 2004).

In the decade following Jomtien, the commitment to EFA was reaffirmed in several global forums, including the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal, and the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). In Dakar, nations committed to several targets and goals to assess progress towards EFA since its inception. Among those was the commitment to reach the objective of guaranteeing education for all by 2015, which was solidified in the Dakar Framework for Action on EFA. The Dakar Framework reaffirmed the original tenets of EFA to guarantee the right to education for all citizens in all societies (Rowell, 2020). Likewise, the MDGs represented a new consensus about international development that bridged the pro-economic approaches advocated for by the World Bank and the equity and rights-based approaches adopted by UNESCO, UNICEF, and many other transnational organizations. However, the MDGs were still critiqued for their minimalist view of the purpose of education, as well as several neoliberal reforms it supported, including privatization standardized testing, and teacher performance incentives. The World Bank, which had been long criticized for undermining the right to education, broadened its stance to focus on universal primary education for all, although it was still driven by a commitment to investing in human capital, rather than guaranteeing human rights (Mundy and Manion, 2014).

Fourth, a justificatory discourse of education as lifesaving or education for protection of children has also emerged. This has been connected to the rise of a subfield of education in emergencies, which has been consolidated starting in the 1990s with global commitments to EFA, as well as an increased recognition of the need to protect children in humanitarian settings (Winthrop and Matsui, 2013; Lerch, 2017; Lopes Cardozo and Novelli, 2018). Following the end of WWII, there was a proliferation of initiatives at the grassroots level by families and communities to provide education for young people, but in

response to the rising number of interstate conflicts that led to displacement on a large scale (Winthrop and Matsui, 2013), international support tended to shift towards life-saving humanitarian interventions of housing, food, and healthcare, leaving a gap in education for children and youth affected by crisis (Burde et al., 2017). It wasn't until the post-Cold War period in the mid-1990s, given the major geopolitical shifts of the time, that a new field called 'education in emergencies' was established.

Within the broader field of development, in the post-Cold War period, while there was a drop in overall development aid, there was also a shift in development policy towards the least developed countries and increased donor coordination efforts (Novelli, 2013; Lopes Cardozo and Novelli, 2018). Provision of aid during that period was less partisan and political than it was during the Cold War, and it tended to be targeted towards those areas considered to be most in need, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. The post-Cold War period also saw a rise in US hegemony and consolidation of the neoliberal political project, which began in the height of the Cold War in the form of the SAPs. Alongside post-Cold War donor coordination and consensus, as well as neoliberal hegemony, there was a rise in Western interventionism, often under American leadership, in high-profile conflicts. Intervention in these conflicts was framed as humanitarian interventions, and drew on issues of human security, human rights, democracy, and freedom (Lopes Cardozo and Novelli, 2018). Especially following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, international aid has become increasingly enmeshed with security interests of major Western powers, and aid to conflict-affected states increased rapidly during the 2000s (Novelli, 2013).

Since the 1990s, alongside the increasing development and humanitarian intervention in conflict zones, there has also been an increasing interest in the delivery of education in emergency contexts. This can be attributed to at least three broad phenomena. First, in addition to growing recognition that armed conflict was harming children, there had been a growing recognition since the late 1990s and early 2000s of the lifesaving potential of education during and after armed conflict. This recognition was catalyzed in part by the 1996 Machel report, *The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*, which highlighted the damaging effects of war for children and the role of education could play in children's protection (Lopes Cardozo and Novelli, 2018). Education, like shelter and food, came to be seen as a lifesaving intervention under the humanitarian framework.

During this time, the education in emergencies agenda gained force among a confluence of global events pressuring humanitarian action to expand beyond its traditional activities. The 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child put education in contexts of armed conflict on the international agenda and was followed up with actions by UN agencies that expanded, strengthened, and institutionalized the protection of children's rights to education (Burde et al., 2017). Commitment to education as a pillar of the humanitarian response was also further articulated in the mid-decade meeting for EFA in Amman, Jordan, in 1996 (Dryden-Peterson, 2011).

Second, this was paralleled by a growing recognition since 2000 that a large proportion of out-of-school children and youth are in conflict-affected and post-conflict countries, and that in order to meet EFA goals, it was imperative to reach these children (Lopes Cardozo and Novelli, 2018). Within the context of a global push to enroll all children in education under EFA, it became imperative to address this disparity if global education goals were to be reached (Winthrop and Matsui, 2013; Lopes Cardozo and Novelli, 2018). With growing attention to the need for education in emergency contexts, and recognition that shorter interstate conflicts are being replaced with longer-lasting intrastate conflicts, in 2000, when the world's ministers of education convened in Dakar to review progress towards the 1990 EFA goals, they laid out six goals for improving education. One of the 12 strategies towards those goals focused on education in crisis, and two of those goals—on gender and education—were later included in the MDGs, elevating access to primary school for all girls and boys, including those in conflict-affected contexts, as a global priority (Winthrop and Matsui, 2013).

Third, the merging of the security and development agenda described above has had strong implications for the field of education specifically. While immediately following the Cold War, development assistance targeted the most vulnerable populations, after the attacks on September 11, 2001, aid to education began to prioritize fragile and conflict affected states. This was justified through arguments that these states were a threat both at home and abroad (Novelli, 2013), but also that, given this politicization of education, there has been a rise in attacks on learners, educators, and education institutions and systems (Lopes Cardozo and Novelli, 2018). There was a sharp rise in aid to conflict-affected states in the 2000s, in large part justified by the 'life saving potential' of education in emergency contexts.

A more recent fifth shift, beginning in 2000 and picking up steam in 2013 in the lead up to the SDGs, the education community has returned to a yet unresolved question—that of what constitutes *quality* education. Recognition that a large proportion of learners who were in school were not actually learning led to an increased focus on ensuring learning outcomes, beyond just access to education. While the focus of quality education and learning represented a deepening of the EFA goals, what exactly quality meant remained to be contested. Like the MDGs, the SDGs are considered as attempting to bridge a narrower human capital focus on quality as learning outcomes and a broader human rights perspective that included free education, inclusion, and equity on the agenda. Within the language of the SDG targets, SDG4 embodied—at least discursively—education as a fundamental human right, as a public good, and as inextricably linked to gender equality. Moreover, SDG4 is linked to five other SDGs, emphasizing education as foundational to achievement of other objectives. Building on discourses of lifelong learning, SDG4 expanded the focus of education from access to primary schooling to meeting the basic learning needs of all children, youth, and adults, guaranteeing

equality of opportunity for quality learning throughout the lifetime (Unterhalter, 2019; Rowell, 2020).

Still, while the language of targets maintained a more equity and human rights approach, the indicators looked at a much narrower focus of education, which failed to capture the full vision of SDG4 (King, 2017; Unterhalter, 2019). This slippage is exemplified in target 4.1, which emphasizes free, equitable, and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant learning outcomes for all girls and boys. The indicator for this target, as Unterhalter (2019) points out, only measures the proportion of girls and boys who achieve minimum proficiency in reading and math at various points in their education trajectory. This reliance on literacy and numeracy, which is aligned with human capital priorities, while important is a poor proxy for the rights-based objectives indicated in the target, such as free education, inclusion of other relevant subject areas, and equity beyond gender (Unterhalter, 2019). In this way, while the goals suggest a consensus on a broader, equity-focused view of ensuring education for all, measurement of progress towards the SDGs still prioritizes an instrumentalist human capital approach to education (Unterhalter, 2019).

Conceptualizations of education in the COVID-19 pandemic

In the time of COVID-19, the debate about education continues. At the height of pandemic-related school closures in April, 2020, 1.5 billion children and adolescents in 194 countries—over 85 percent of the world's learners—were out of school (UNESCO, no date, accessed November 13, 2020). The social, economic, and political shock of the pandemic has created a new forum for the debate on what it means to provide education for all. The same global education actors who were influential at previous moments of the education debate have developed a vast body of policy guidance documents aiming to influence the COVID-19 education responses of national and local education actors, as well as that of other transnational organizations. It is possible to observe the debate playing out in how the three discourses are deployed in these documents.

In this section, I set out the nature and form of these discourses as portrayed in several key documents put forth by UNESCO, UNICEF, The World Bank, INEE, and Save the Children, and several jointly developed documents. Of course, delineating the discourses separately is overly simplistic. Instead, the discourses are interwoven throughout most of the documents in different, and sometimes contradictory, ways. This is especially true in documents developed collectively by many of these actors, but also within documents published by a single actor. This is well illustrated by the *Framework for Reopening Schools*, developed jointly by UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank, the World Food Programme, and UNHCR:

While we do not yet have enough evidence to measure the effect of school closures on the risk of disease transmission, the adverse effects of school closures on children's *safety, wellbeing* and *learning* are well documented. Interrupting education services also has serious, long-term consequences for *economies and societies* such as increased inequality, poorer health outcomes, and reduced social cohesion. In many countries, data on virus prevalence is incomplete and decision makers will need to make their best assessments in a context of incomplete information and uncertainty. National governments and partners must simultaneously work to promote and safeguard every child's *right to education, health and safety*, as set out in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The best interest of the child must be paramount. (UNESCO et al., 2020, p. 1, emphasis my own)

Still, to explore how the different views about education may be shaping education during COVID-19 and beyond, it is important to first understand how the discourses are constructed and, therefore, what values they are conveying.

In these documents, the three discourses share several features. The discourses all invoke the SDGs, and particularly SDG4, ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all, in rationalizing the need to respond to COVID-19. According to all three discourses, COVID-19 has had an unprecedented impact on children's access to education, learning, and protection, and it has had the most profound impacts on the most marginalized. Therefore, education responses to the pandemic need to be equitable and inclusive, and they must mitigate all of these effects. Moreover, within the discourses, the pandemic is an opportunity for strengthening education systems so they can contribute to an array of better outcomes for learners, communities, and societies, and uphold global commitments to ensuring education for all. However, when examined further, significantly different interpretations of what it means to guarantee inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning underpin the discourses, highlighting that the debate about the purpose of education—and thus what must be provided, for whom, and how—continues.

The Education for Human Capital discourse

The Education for Human Capital discourse emphasizes the instrumental and primarily collective economic value of education. The human capital discourse was prominent in three of the policy documents I reviewed (Muroga et al., 2020; World Bank Group, 2020; UNESCO et al., 2020c). Ensuring education for all, according to this discourse, is for the purpose of increasing individual earning power (a proxy for productivity), which will increase human capital and social development, and, therefore, lead to economic growth, as clearly explained by the joint position paper published by UNESCO, the World Food Programme,

UNICEF, and the World Health Organization, *The Importance of Investing in the Wellbeing of Children to Avert the Learning Crisis*:

Children who spend more years in school earn more as adults, and this benefit accrues over time to create a substantial economic return to their community and to their nation. More years of education also equates to better overall health and the effects are passed from one generation to the next; women who have been able to complete more years of schooling have fewer, healthier and better educated children. On the contrary, failing to invest in a healthy and educated population compromises human capital – the sum of a population’s health, skills, knowledge and experience, and undermines sustainable growth and poverty reduction. (UNESCO et al., 2020, p. 4)

However, according to this discourse, COVID-19 is likely to contribute to school dropout and learning loss as a result of school closures and the economic, health, and protection impacts on children and families, especially for the most disadvantaged. This learning loss, drop out, and increased inequality will have catastrophic effects on children’s future earnings and productivity, will increase poverty and other social problems, and will ultimately impact upon national and global economies.

Education for the development of human capital, economic growth, and social development

The emphasis on equitable access to schooling and the acquisition of fundamental skills for all children—as well as the provision of health, psychosocial support, and protection insofar as it supports children’s ability to be in school and learn—is prioritized in the Education for Human Capital discourse because it *specifically contributes* to the development of human capital. The discourse concerns itself with children’s future earnings, potential productivity levels, and contribution to the global economy (UNESCO et al., 2020c); net benefits in dollars to society over a child’s life time (Muroga et al., 2020); and avoiding “generational catastrophe” (UNESCO et al., 2020c). It argues for the “soundness of investment” and cost-effectiveness of different responses, and it decries “inefficiency” and “waste” in terms of children repeating or dropping out of school (Muroga et al., 2020). Beyond collective economic benefits of education, the discourse warns against social unrest, crime, adolescent fertility, and increased inequality, all of which constitute threats to the stability of national and global economies.

This is prominently shown in the World Bank’s report when discussing ‘long-run costs’ of COVID-19 and its impacts. After clearly articulating the concern that the pandemic—as a result of the economic impact, school closures, and psychosocial effects—will increase drop out and learning loss, the Bank argues:

Left unchecked, [the impacts of COVID-19] will exact long-term costs on both students and society. Given the likely increase in learning poverty, this crisis could prevent a whole

generation from realizing their true potential. Students who are forced to drop out of school or experience significant declines in learning will face lower lifetime productivity and earnings. Inequality will rise, because these impacts will likely be greater for students from poor and marginalized households. The children who need education the most to climb out of poverty will be the ones most likely to be deprived of it by the crisis. This decline in economic prospects could lead in turn to increase in criminal activities and risky behaviors. Social unrest among youth could also rise: in many low- and middle-income countries the combination of a youth bulge and poor prospects could prove a combustible mix. These adverse impacts may reverberate for a long time, as lower human capital in the current student cohort—concentrated among the most disadvantaged—perpetuates the vicious cycle of poverty and inequality. (World Bank Group, 2020, p. 6)

A crisis within a crisis: Access to schooling and learning poverty

A distinguishing feature of the human capital discourse is the connection between SDG4 and the use of the concept of a ‘learning crisis’ and indicator of ‘learning poverty’. According to the World Bank’s policy paper, *The COVID-19 Pandemic: Shocks to Education and Policy Responses*:

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the world was living a learning crisis. Before the pandemic, 258 million children and youth of primary- and secondary-school age were out of school. And low schooling quality meant many who were in school learned too little. The Learning Poverty rate in low- and middle-income countries was 53 percent—meaning that over half of all 10-year-old children could not read and understand a simple age-appropriate story. Even worse, the crisis was not equally distributed: the most disadvantaged children and youth had the worst access to schooling, highest dropout rates, and the largest learning deficits. All this means that the world was already far off track for meeting Sustainable Development Goal 4, which commits all nations to ensure that, among other ambitious targets, “all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education.” (World Bank Group, 2020, p. 5).

According to the discourse, COVID-19 is exacerbating the existing learning crisis and contributing to further dropout and learning loss. As a result, guidance to education decisionmakers in the COVID-19 response encourages centering core ‘foundational skills’. This, according to the discourse, should be done through practices of curriculum ‘prioritization’, ‘simplification’, or ‘focusing’ (World Bank Group, 2020). While the document does not articulate what is meant by foundational skills, or what should remain when the curriculum is simplified or focused, the utilization of the learning crisis and learning

poverty concepts point to literacy and numeracy, and specifically, reading a simple text by age 10 (The World Bank, 2019).

This emphasis on the learning crisis, and particularly the focus on access and foundational skills, is firmly rooted in human capital logic that education is a driver of human capital, and in turn of economic growth and social development. According to the Bank, the argument is supported by:

... a mountain of evidence on the benefits of education. For individuals and families, education leads to higher productivity and earnings, poverty reduction, higher rates of employment, better health outcomes, and greater civic engagement. For societies, education contributes to faster innovation and growth, better-functioning institutions, greater intergenerational social mobility, higher levels of social trust, and a lower likelihood of conflict. **We now are aware that foundational skills such as basic literacy and numeracy are important drivers of these benefits.** (The World Bank, 2019, p. 9, emphasis in original).

On the surface, the human capital discourse claims to encompass a broad scope for access from pre-primary through higher education. However, by utilizing the learning crisis concept and learning poverty indicator, the human capital discourse suggests prioritization of primary and, to some extent, secondary schooling. In the documents, pre-primary education, higher education, and non-formal/alternative education take a back seat. For example, after extensively describing evidence from prior crises on the potential impacts of school closures on drop out and learning loss at a primary and secondary level, the same World Bank policy document only briefly mentions the high number of students for whom postsecondary and pre-primary education has been affected. The argument continues that the reason why pre-primary closures matter is because of their effect on later learning:

This period of child development and initial instruction for literacy and numeracy is essential for the development of foundational learning skills on which all future learning rests. Student learning is cumulative: if they fail to acquire foundational skills in early grades, children may find it much more difficult to learn later. Hence a crisis-driven weakening of early childhood development and foundational learning in early primary school will mean lower learning trajectories for a whole generation (World Bank Group, 2020).

Protection, wellbeing, and equity in the education for human capital discourse

The human capital discourse frequently asserts the need to address a child's safety and protection, nutrition, and physical and mental health. Still, the recognition that COVID-19 is having grave impacts on children's holistic wellbeing, and advocacy to address those impacts, is used instrumentally, to ensure that all children can return to primary and secondary

school and learn foundational skills. The pandemic and its economic effects and school closures, according to the discourse, is increasing child labor, teenage pregnancy, stress and mental health conditions, and physical and sexual violence against children. Lack of access to school-based interventions is likely to increase malnutrition and decreased access to important health and safety education and services. According to the discourse, policymakers should prioritize child wellbeing by removing barriers to ensure all children can—and are incentivized—to return to school:

School health and nutrition programmes, including access to water and sanitation, healthy and safe school meals and healthy food environments in schools, micronutrient supplementation, vaccinations, and life-skills based health and literacy and sexual and reproductive health education and services, among others, provide an incentive for families to send children back to school, and help them stay in school (UNESCO, World Food Programme, et al., 2020c, p. 2).

The human capital discourse also foregrounds evidence that malnutrition, illness, stress, and other health and mental health issues affect a child's ability to learn if/when they do return to school. In response, the discourse instrumentalizes interventions such as social-emotional learning as a way to improve academic learning.

Finally, according to the Education for Human Capital discourse, impacts of the pandemic will be worse for the most disadvantaged, namely children in the lowest wealth quintiles, girls, children with disabilities, and children affected prior to the pandemic by other crises. These children, the discourse argues, are more likely to drop out, more likely to fall behind academically, and more likely to be affected by economic, psychosocial, and protection impacts. Therefore, policymakers and decisionmakers need to prioritize an equitable response to COVID-19 to ensure that all children are able to return to school and to learn. However, the focus on equity in the COVID-19 response is, again, connected back to the need to develop human capital to support economic growth and social development.

Human rights discourses

Two other prominent discourses—the Education as a Human Right discourse and the Education for Protection discourse—draw on a rights-based view of ensuring education for all. In my analysis, these discourses were frequently deployed jointly—two documents most prominently deployed the human rights discourse (UNESCO, 2020a,b), while five documents equally and simultaneously utilized the human rights and protection arguments (Save the Children, 2020; Save the Children et al., 2020; The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action and Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies, 2020; UNESCO et al., 2020a,b).

The education as a human right discourse: Equitable, inclusive access to lifelong learning for all

In contrast to the human capital discourse, the Education as a Human Right discourse highlights the intrinsic benefit of education to children and the moral and legal commitment made by the global community to ensure all children's right to education. Like the human capital discourse, according to the human rights discourse, COVID-19 is contributing to drop out and learning loss, especially for the most marginalized children and youth as a result of school closures and the economic, health, and protection impacts of the pandemic. However, different from the human capital discourse, this is problematic because it is a violation of young people's inalienable right to education and represents a moral and legal failure of the global community to uphold its commitments to guaranteeing that right.

Like the human capital discourse, the human rights discourse anchors its justification for education in SDG4. However, while the human capital discourse primarily draws the linkage between SDG4 and the so-called learning crisis, the human rights discourse more strongly connects SDG4 with the right to education for all, as outlined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989). The concern for the right to education centers access and learning, as does the human capital discourse. However, the Education as a Human Right discourse spans the education spectrum, from pre-primary to tertiary and beyond, including (although not always explicitly) technical/vocational and non-formal/alternative education, as shown in UNESCO's advocacy paper, *How many students are at risk of not returning to school?*

UNESCO projections, covering 180 countries and territories, estimate that about **24 million students** (from pre-primary to tertiary education) will be at risk of not returning to education institutions in 2020, including care centres, schools, universities or other training institutions, of which 10.9 million are in primary and secondary levels... **Tertiary education** is affected the most, with an estimated 3.5% decline in enrolment, resulting in 7.9 million fewer students. This is followed by **pre-primary education** with an estimated 2.8% decline in enrolments, corresponding to 5 million children. **Primary and secondary education** are likely to be relatively less affected (UNESCO, 2020b, p. 5, emphasis in original).

While both the human capital and the human rights discourses are intentionally vague about what they mean by learning, there is some evidence that the human rights discourse expands the concept of quality beyond foundational skills. Like the human capital discourse, the human rights discourse highlights that the most marginalized learners will be most likely to drop out of school or face learning losses, highlighting the need for equitable education responses to the pandemic. Different from the human capital discourse, however, the human rights discourse goes beyond instrumentalizing equity for building human capital

to justifying an equitable response based on the provision of the right to education, as illustrated in UNESCO's advocacy brief, *COVID-19 Education Response: Preparing the Reopening of Schools:*

The negative impact of school closures will disproportionately affect those who already experience barriers in accessing education, especially those from vulnerable groups, while the learning gap between them and other students is at risk of widening. Equally concerning are longer-term implications for the enjoyment of the right to education for all. When planning for and implementing school reopening measures, therefore, emphasis should be placed on upholding the provisions of the right to education and compulsory education for these students, closely monitoring school returns, and defining appropriate recovery of learning loss, exploring every possible modality (UNESCO, 2020a, p. 20).

Like the Education for Human Capital discourse, within the Education as a Human Right discourse, protection is viewed as a means to ensuring all children are able to access education and learn. To illustrate, UNESCO explains that "the effectiveness of the policy decisions and reopening strategies will depend on the level of preparedness of the education system across several factors," including infrastructure preparedness, teacher preparedness, pedagogical preparedness, and "student, family, and society preparedness, including awareness and willingness to return to school and ability to continue learning" (UNESCO, 2020a, p. 20). The document elaborates:

As in past health crises, students, their families and their communities might be directly or indirectly affected by COVID-19. Illness, for them or their families, life loss but also wider socio-economic changes, such as loss of income, lack of nutrition and social protection, exposure to violence and other adverse conditions might even push students from vulnerable groups out of education. Particular attention must be paid to girls who might experience a higher risk of gender-based violence, early marriage and pregnancy (UNESCO, 2020a, p. 22).

Health supports—elaborated in the document to include safety and security on the way to and in school, health education, care for mental health and social-emotional wellbeing, and prevention of gender-based violence, early marriage and pregnancy, and sexual and domestic violence—are instrumentalized as one type of support to meet the medium-term goal of "ensuring students, teachers, administrative and other staff are ready to resume teaching and learning" (UNESCO, 2020a, p. 24). This instrumentalization of protection is echoed in UNESCO's recommendations that policy responses to mitigate the risk of drop out should increase focus on inclusion and equity, ensure provision of sexual and reproductive health and rights are considered, and ensuring learning environments are free from violence and strengthen socialization and wellbeing (UNESCO,

2020b, pp. 14–15). However, what is largely missing from this discourse is how access to inclusive, equitable, quality education is instrumental in ensuring children's wider range of rights—to health, protection, and holistic wellbeing.

The Education for Protection discourse: Holistic wellbeing for all

Like the Education as a Human Right discourse, the Education for Protection discourse foregrounds children's fundamental rights, often articulated through the SDGs. The protection discourse extends the human rights discourse, however, which prioritizes children's right *to* and *in* education, further arguing for children's rights to protection, health, and safety *through* education. This is illustrated in the INEE's policy paper with The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, *Weighing Up the Risks: School closure and reopening under COVID-19—When, why, and what impact?:*

Before the COVID-19 crisis, 258 million children were already denied their right to quality education; millions more are now at risk of having this right disrupted and denied (UNESCO, 2019). This pandemic has also increased protection risks, including those related to various forms of violence, abuse, and exploitation, thereby putting the achievement of SDGs 5.2, 5.3, 8.7 and 16.2 further from reach. (The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action and Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies, 2020, pp. 3–4).

The Education for Protection discourse is based in the value of education to protect children and provide for their holistic wellbeing. According to the Education for Protection discourse, COVID-19 is causing learners to miss out on essential health, nutrition, and safety interventions that are provided in schools, and it is putting them at risk of harmful practices, insecurity, and violence when out of school. This is especially true for the most marginalized children and youth. This is problematic, according to the protection discourse, because it is a violation of the rights of the child and represents a moral and legal failure of the global community to uphold its commitments to guaranteeing those rights, as illustrated in Save the Children's paper, *Save Our Education: Protect Every Child's Right to Learn in the COVID-19 Response and Recovery:*

The impact of school closures extends beyond disruption to children's learning and carries other major risks to the most marginalised children, including those from low-income households, refugees and internally displaced children, girls, and children with disabilities. These children and young people rely on schools to access other services such as school meals; menstrual hygiene kits; health services, including deworming and malaria treatment; child protection services; specialist support for children with disabilities; and mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) activities and

interventions. For girls, schools can serve as a protective factor against adolescent pregnancy, as well as child marriage and other forms of gender-based violence, through schoolchildren's proximity to trusted adults, increased interaction with peers and improved knowledge of rights. In the education response to school closure, it is essential both that learning is kept alive and that these other impacts are effectively addressed. (Save the Children, 2020, p. 8).

In contrast to both the human capital and human rights discourses, the Education for Protection discourse focuses nearly entirely on access to education as the means for ensuring children's rights to health, safety, and protection are upheld, although it maintains the human rights view of the entire education spectrum, as further articulated in the Alliance and INEE's policy paper:

School closures and extended periods of isolation at home may negatively impact the mental health and well-being of children and youth. Children and young people who live in stressful or violent environments, particularly the youngest children, face psychological distress, physical harm, and negative impacts on brain development due to toxic stress. Children may also experience an increased risk of exposure to child labor, all types of violence and exploitation, and (for girls) early marriage and teen pregnancies... In contrast, safe, quality education can offer a protective environment for children and youth who are at risk of abuse, exploitation, and neglect. It gives children access to adults who can keep them safe during school hours and to community support networks that help protect them. Child protection and well-being should be central considerations when weighing up decisions on school closures and reopening (The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action and Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies, 2020, p. 7).

The protection discourse foregrounds that not all children are expected to be impacted equally, and that access to education, and thus protection and access to protective services, is likely to be a challenge for the most marginalized. The discourse emphasized the differential impacts for a wide range of marginalized groups, including children living in countries affected by conflict and crisis, migrants and forcibly displaced children, ethnic and other minorities, LGBTQ and other sexual orientation minorities, children in extreme poverty or living on the street, or children with disabilities. As with the human rights discourse, the concept of quality education is broadened from the human capital discourse, which focuses on learning foundational skills, to include the provision of an inclusive and equitable learning environment that meets the protection needs of marginalized learners. The joint document produced by UNESCO, UNICEF, Plan International, UNGEI, and the Malala Fund, *Building Back Equal: Girls Back to School Guide*, illustrates this:

For many girls, schools provide a lifeline, offering vital information and support (onsite or through referral services) for their nutrition, menstrual hygiene management (MHM), and broader psychosocial and sexual and reproductive health needs. Due to COVID-related school closures, roughly 370 million school children are missing out on school meals and other types of health support. Safeguarding vital services for girls, particularly the most marginalised, through alternative delivery mechanisms for health and nutrition education, commodities and support is needed during school closures to avert educational, psychosocial, health and other negative outcomes. As schools reopen, governments' first priority is to protect the health and safety of all learners, teachers and all school staff to control the pandemic. An integrated, gender-responsive and multi-sectoral approach to planning for school health, nutrition and WASH is also needed to ensure the (re-) establishment of health-promoting learning environments and essential services that address girls' specific needs (UNESCO et al., 2020, p. 9).

What does this mean for education during COVID-19 and beyond?

Historically, major social, political, and economic moments have created openings for contestation of the meaning of ensuring education for all, and COVID-19 is no different. COVID-19, as agreed by the wide range of global education actors is leading to tremendous economic, social, and educational impacts for learners, families, communities, and societies.

However, there are significant differences in how the problem of COVID-19 is framed between the human capital, human rights, and protection discourses. While the discourses are united in their concerns for access to education, learning, protection, and equity, further analysis of the content reveals stark differences in their interpretation of the meaning of ensuring education for all. While both the human capital and human rights discourses highlight the likelihood of drop out and learning loss especially for the most marginalized, the human capital discourse does so because of the effects this will have on national growth and the global economy. The human rights discourse, in contrast, frames this dropout and learning loss risk as a moral and legal failure of the global community to guarantee all children's right to education. The human capital discourse, moreover, narrows the concept of learning to foundational skills—namely literacy and numeracy—while the human rights discourse offers a broader view of educational quality and learning. Likewise, the Education for Protection discourse presents a broader view of educational quality by focusing on learning environments that ensure children's basic rights to safety, protection, health, and wellbeing are provided for. The human capital and human rights discourses, too, are concerned

with children's protection, but instrumentalize it for the purpose of ensuring children are in school and learning.

As shown through my review of the literature on five discursive 'moments', the very discourses that justify the form and function of education—alongside other social, political, and economic factors—have material effects on education systems, teachers, learners, families, communities, and societies writ large. In other words, using the framework of GSAE, the moment of the politics of education in which we are witnessing a continued contestation over the form and function of education (alongside, although not discussed in this paper, significant shifts in funding and advocacy priorities)—is likely to lead to significant changes within the moment of educational practice, politics, and outcomes.

So, what does this mean for education in the moment of COVID-19 and beyond? At the time of writing this article (mid 2022), we are 2.5 years on from the start of the pandemic, but we are not out of the woods yet. Learners, families, teachers, schools, and education systems have had to adapt and readapt their educational offerings in the attempt to ensure that all young people are able to access a high-quality education, in line with SDG4. And while the significant changes have been implemented, it is too early to be able to know exactly the effect the pandemic will have on education worldwide in the long-term.

One of many possibilities is that the narrative that COVID-19 is leading to learning loss, on top of a pre-existing learning crisis, seems to be providing an opportunity to further entrench a narrow conception of quality of education and learning. Several of the documents I reviewed deploy the learning crisis concept, learning poverty metric, and recommendations for curriculum focusing, prioritization, and simplification, and they instrumentalize protection and equity for the purposes of ensuring children are able to access education and learn. The narrow conception of education is problematic for several reasons. First, it defines quality as learning outcomes, denying the importance of other functions education can provide (e.g., protection, wellbeing). It narrows 'learning' to a focus on foundational skills, which reduces non-foundational/core subjects—which are essential for children's holistic development and wellbeing—to add-ons or nice-to-haves. Second, it de-prioritizes process markers of quality, such as measures guaranteeing education is truly free, including removing hidden costs; ensuring gender equity and gender sensitivity; and providing safe and protective learning environments. And third, it does not attend to deeper social, political, and economic issues and intersecting inequalities that affect cognitive, social, and emotional outcomes for learners. Yet, it is these deeper issues that ultimately will affect whether global commitments to ensuring education for all are achieved.

Another possibility, though, is that COVID-19 may be accelerating a connection between education and child protection, and a recognition of the need to meet the needs of the 'whole child' within schools, a potentially positive effect. Until the COVID-19 pandemic, the linkage between child protection and education has mainly been discussed in the subfield of education in emergencies, beginning during the

third discursive moment I described above. In fact, within the last several years, there has been growing movement and collaboration between child protection and education in emergencies actors. However, during the pandemic, the recognition of the protective function of education may be becoming mainstream. Children everywhere are experiencing physical and mental health issues, are exposed to child labor, and are experiencing increased violence as a result of the pandemic, regardless of whether they were previously exposed to crises. Better ensuring that education programming meets the holistic needs of all children—including protection, health, nutrition, and mental health—can improve child wellbeing mitigate protection risks. It can also increase enrollment and retention in education, as well as improve learning outcomes ([Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies and the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 2020](#)). The risk, however, is that the connection between child protection and education be instrumentalized in service of developing fundamental skills, doing little to ensure that education serves broader goals connected to equity and inclusion, and meeting the holistic needs of all children.

We have repeatedly observed, since the post-WWII period, and as an effect of the historical social, political, and economic factors of the time, the emergence and evolution of several discourses in education, including those of Education for Human Capital, Education as a Human Right, and Education for Protection. And we have seen how these discourses, with their different connotations on the meaning of providing education for all, have the power (alongside other cultural, social, and economic phenomena) to shape educational policies that are developed, how education is delivered, and, ultimately, outcomes for learners, families, communities, and societies writ large. COVID-19 is not an exception to this rule. It is certain that the pandemic is going to leave an indelible impact on the concept of ensuring education for all and material effects on education systems, learners, teachers, and communities for the long term. However, exactly what those impacts will be is not inevitable. While the meaning of education is always a legacy of its past, and is mediated by its present, the important question

is—what do we want education to be during COVID-19 and beyond?

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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