ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Exploring children's experiences of schooling in Tanzania: How the 'hidden curriculum' undermines aspirations for sustainable development

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Abstract

In the context of aspirations that firmly position education as the key to multiple global development goals, we raise concerns about how education is experienced by many children, particularly in low-income, postcolonial contexts. Drawing from two, in-depth qualitative studies in Tanzania, we demonstrate that existing pedagogical practices, including the use of an unfamiliar language of learning and teaching, constitute a 'hidden curriculum' that powerfully undermines the vision of education embedded in the sustainable development agenda. We argue that research that foregrounds children's experiences should have a more prominent role as it enables us to understand the lived implications of global policy-making.

KEYWORDS

education, language, pedagogy, sustainable development goals, Tanzania

INTRODUCTION

The positioning of education in the narrative surrounding global aspirations for sustainable development is well demonstrated in the title of a UNESCO report produced in the run-up to

the release of the sustainable development goals (SDGs): 'Sustainable Development Begins with Education' (UNESCO, 2014a). Education is positioned centrally as a fundamental 'driver of development' (UNESCO, 2016, p. 22) and 'an enabler for all 17 SDGs' (UNESCO, 2022, p. 3). SDG4 itself commits to enabling all people to access 'inclusive and equitable quality education' (UNESCO, 2016, p. 7), and the form of education that is envisioned as enabling these cross-dimensional benefits is set out in further documentation relating to education for sustainable development (ESD). Here, education is characterised as empowering, inclusive and interdisciplinary, and requires transformational pedagogies to provide learners with the knowledge, competences and values to become agents of change and creative, resilient, critical collaborators and problem-solvers (UNESCO, 2021, 2022).

Enabling ambitious change in complex open education systems is rife with tensions, and a number of these tensions and barriers to achievement of the education and wider goals are well documented, for example, measurement (Alexander, 2015; Benavot & Smith, 2020), funding and resources (Archer & Muntasim, 2020) and the fact that education systems with their origins in the colonial period have often contributed to *un*sustainable development and the reproduction of inequalities (Tikly, 2020). Further examination of each of these areas is outside the scope of this paper but recognition of the complex and dynamic 'constellation' of policies, processes and practices that shape classroom learning and children's school experience (Brown, 2022) should be kept in view. Instead, this paper is concerned about the significant gaps and silences that have been highlighted around the process and experience of education, particularly questions of pedagogy, including the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) (Barrett, 2011; Milligan et al., 2020). For example, Alexander (2015, p. 254) argues that 'pedagogy is the missing ingredient in accounts of educational quality'. The vision for education developed and embedded in the ESD agenda does outline the types of learning experiences that children should have access to, but the absence of indicators that consider educational processes under SDG4 contributes to complex and contextual issues like pedagogy often being overlooked.

In this paper, we argue that prioritising research on children's experiences of education is crucial if we want to engage with and understand educational processes. By drawing on examples from two qualitative studies in Tanzania, one at the primary and one at the secondary level, we assert that questions of pedagogy are, in fact, much more than 'missing ingredients' in quality education. When attention is not focused on these aspects of teaching and learning, they are not simply absent. Rather, we use the concept of the 'hidden curriculum', to acknowledge the way issues of pedagogy, including the requirement to use an unfamiliar LoLT, profoundly shape children's experiences of education and the particular sets of values and ways of being that are taught and learned (Giroux & Penna, 1979; Woodhouse & Enukoha, 1986). We share examples that highlight how existing pedagogical approaches: value memorisation of knowledge and correctness over curiosity and collaboration; exclude children's broader life experiences and knowledge; and normalise fear, shame and struggle as necessary parts of learning. Ultimately, we assert that failure to consider and address these key aspects of educational process and children's experiences of education not only risks stalling progress towards SDG4 and related cross-goal aspirations, but actively undermines the vision of education that is embedded in the Sustainable Development agenda.

PEDAGOGY AND EXPERIENCES OF EDUCATION IN THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS AND EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The critique that questions of pedagogy and children's educational experiences are neglected by global policy agendas is particularly directed at the creation of targets and indicators that are limited by conceptualisations of what it means to be able to measure achievements and track progress (Benavot & Smith, 2020; Unterhalter, 2019). This means that, despite calls for broader, qualitative approaches to understanding processes of learning (Barrett, 2011), the SDG4 indicators are predominately focused on quantifiable measures, with the quality of learning measured by learner attainment on standardised tests in reading and numeracy. There are some indicators that demonstrate values relating to the content of education and the types of learning environments that children should have access to. For example, under target 4.7 the provision in curricula for key themes relating to ESD and equity and human rights is measured. Target 4.a includes a focus on inclusive access to basic infrastructure, such as sanitation facilities, and measures of physical safety, including bullying and attacks on students and staff. Under target 4.5, there is also an indicator that counts the percentage of learners who have their 'first or home language as the language of instruction', but this has been highly criticised, both because gathering this information is optional, and because this indicator fails to acknowledge either the complex realities of school language practices, or their significance in shaping the quality of learning experiences (Milligan et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2016).

When we move away from the targets and indicators associated with SDG4 and look more broadly at the discourse and aspirations around ESD, there is a now familiar set of knowledge, skills and values that are considered necessary for children to 'become change agents for sustainable development' (UNESCO, 2022, p. 2). Cognitive and non-cognitive skills include critical and creative thinking, collaboration, problem-solving, resilience and taking responsible action as citizens. In many cases these overlap with other named sets of skills, for example '21st century skills' (Geisinger, 2016) and 'global citizenship skills' (UNESCO, 2015). Each of these has their own critiques (see, De Andreotti, 2014; Kirschner & Stoyanov, 2020), but are all premised on requirements for a changing, globalised, uncertain world and a call for a shift away from 'traditional pedagogical approaches', for example,

> ...effective ESD is contingent on a shift in pedagogical approaches, from traditional teacher-centered pedagogies towards teacher-facilitated and collaborative discovery and problem-solving approaches (UNESCO, 2014b, p. 86).

It is alarming to see the binary of learner versus teacher-centred still being presented in ESD discourses as it has been vigorously critiqued and rejected (see Alexander, 2020; Schweisfurth, 2011; Vavrus, 2009). However, there is considerable literature that documents the characteristics of pedagogical approaches needed to enable children to develop complex capacities needed for a more sustainable future, and consensus seems to exist around a few key areas. First, there is a need for contextual, place-based methodologies, recognising Indigenous knowledge systems (in which languages are an intrinsic part) (Manteaw, 2012; Mbah, Ajaps, & Molthan-Hill, 2021). In addition, pedagogies need to go beyond the transmission of knowledge and promote action-oriented, experiential, participatory learning (Bascopé et al., 2019). And finally, approaches need to make space for children's critical and reflexive engagement (see Sporre et al., 2022). Although there are still, undoubtedly, critiques and debates around the framing of the ESD agenda (Kopnina, 2020), and the

importance placed on contextual relevance means that pedagogy cannot be globally standardised, this body of literature paints a shared vision of the types of educational experiences that children should have opportunities to engage with. It also makes it clear that what children should be learning is much broader than reading and mathematics, but includes promoting values and attitudes of equity, diversity and active global citizenship, as well as fostering respectful relationships between people and with nature (UNESCO, 2022).

CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES AS WINDOWS TO THE 'HIDDEN CURRICULUM'

Actual, individual children and their experiences of schooling can seem far removed from global discourses of educational quality and equity, and the achievement of global goals. The connection between global-level policy-making and classroom practices and experiences is fraught with complexities and heterogeneity, shaped by multi-dimensional contextual differences. These complexities, at least in part, contribute to the fact that children from low- and middle-income countries (LMIC) and their experience of schooling are rarely foregrounded in education research, particularly at the global policy level (Schweisfurth, 2011; Westbrook et al., 2013). But one significant result of this absence is that schools, teachers and learners 'tend to be neutralised and appear frozen in macro-level and quantitative research accounts' (Dunne, 2007, p. 499). This paper argues that we must engage much more fully and urgently with learners' accounts of their schooling experiences. This is not only important as a way to more fully understand the lived implications of global policy-making, but, central to this paper, is the fact that children's experiences of education clearly highlight where current practices fall short of, and actively undermine, aspirations for education in the Sustainable Development agenda.

The arguments developed here are framed through the concept of the 'hidden curriculum', which has been developed and used to interpret educational research in a wide range of contexts (see Nuryana et al., 2023). The basic premise of the hidden curriculum centres on troubling the assumption that, in schooling, what is explicitly planned and taught is what is learned (Giroux & Penna, 1979). The ideas underpinning the concept of the hidden curriculum have been traced back to early twentieth-century work by John Dewey (see Rossouw & Frick, 2023) and Emile Durkheim (see Barthes, 2018) who highlight the purpose of education, its socialising and ideological functions, and the influence of the learning environment. More detailed studies of social relations and classroom interactions in the 1960s and 70s cemented the concept of the 'hidden curriculum' as a conceptual tool for exposing barriers to educational change and making visible the tacit assumptions, messages and values that are transmitted to learners (Apple, 1971; Dreeben, 1968).

Although many of these examples are from Europe and North America, the concept of the 'hidden curriculum' has also been powerfully used in critiques of education in Africa and other contexts in the global South, particularly when considering the role of schooling in transmitting and shaping social values and norms (Woodhouse & Enukoha, 1986). Several studies have highlighted the 'hidden curriculum' relating to gender, for example, looking at the portrayal of gender roles in textbooks in Tanzania (Mkuchu, 2004); gendered patterns of classroom interaction in Zimbabwe (Mutekwe et al., 2013); and broader social relationships in and through schooling in Botswana and Ghana (Dunne, 2007; Dunne & Adzahlie-Mensah, 2016). The concept of the 'hidden curriculum' has also been used to highlight messages transmitted through shadow education in Cambodia (Bray et al., 2018) and has been identified as a tool for marginalisation

and exclusion of rural migrant children in urban public schools in China (Zhang & Luo, 2016). Writing from extensive experience of teaching and research in education in Tanzania, Vavrus argued that the 'hidden curriculum' may, in fact, 'be more instructive for students than anything in the national curriculum could be' (2021, p. 118). The concept of the 'hidden curriculum' asks us to look beyond the stated subject content and to explore the norms and ways of being that are shown to be valued through the ways education is practised and experienced.

When we apply the concept of the 'hidden curriculum', it is immediately apparent that questions of pedagogy are of central concern. After all, 'what children learn is directly related to what and *how* teachers teach' (Livingston et al., 2017, p. 11, our emphasis added). This, in turn, is shaped by the particular social, historical and cultural dynamics of the context of schooling (Tabulawa, 2013). There are several interlinking areas of literature which have investigated these intermingling factors 'outside' the classroom, often demonstrating how they pull in directions contrary to formal curriculum goals. For example, these include the strong influence of high-stakes, content-driven examinations that encourage teachers to 'teach to the test' (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2013; Schweisfurth, 2013) and the lack of professional development and support for teachers to implement new competency-based curricula and 'learner-centred' pedagogies, which often contrast with their own experience of classroom learning, and with historically shaped social norms which emphasise a more authoritarian and hierarchical adult-child relationship (Mligo, 2016; Tabulawa, 2013). Although it is important to acknowledge these important literatures, this paper cannot adequately engage with debates around why approaches to education that are set out in global and national education policies may not be implemented at the classroom level. Instead, we aim to shift the focus to consider what children *are* learning from their experiences of schooling as it is currently being practised.

One key feature of the ways of being and doing in education in many LMIC, postcolonial contexts, is the central role of an unfamiliar language as the LoLT. In Tanzania, English is introduced as the LoLT from the start of secondary schooling, but this is late compared to many African countries where the shift away from local languages happens either from the start of primary schooling (e.g. Rwanda) or from the third or fourth year (Trudell, 2016). There is a significant body of evidence that demonstrates that the use of an unfamiliar LoLT undermines both quality and equity aspirations for education, making it more difficult for learners without access to additional language support to participate in and demonstrate learning (Afitska et al., 2013; Ouane & Glanz, 2011), and contributing to increasing dropout rates (Bamgbose, 2014; Vuzo, 2018). It has been demonstrated that multilingual approaches that include and recognise familiar languages are a 'vital resource' for both additional language learning and subject learning 'throughout education' and are crucial to improving the quality of education (Bowden & Barrett, 2022, p. 44). Considering this ever-growing evidence base, and the commitment within the ESD discourse to valuing Indigenous knowledges, it is a matter of significant frustration that the discussion of language(s) remains peripheral to the influential SDG framework (Mweri, 2020; Ulmer & Wydra, 2022).

When considering the 'hidden curriculum' of language-in-education policy and practice, it is important to note that official language values are often very explicit, with many schools displaying 'English Only' signage and with reports of the use of corporal punishment and other forms of humiliation to enforce these language rules (Joyce-Gibbons et al., 2018; Kiramba, 2018). It has been argued that the exclusion of familiar languages transmits 'hidden' messages to young people that devalue their home languages and cultures, reproduce the power of English and position learners as 'linguistically deficient' (McKinney, 2017, p. 63; wa Thiong'o, 1986). Moreover, it has been shown that messages about which languages are most valued can work together with

other norms and prejudices to further delegitimise the contributions of some groups, for example, girls in secondary classrooms in Rwanda (Kuchah et al., 2022), or Black learners in South Africa (Kerfoot & Bello-Nonjengele, 2023). The effect of this is a 'hidden curriculum' that is absorbed unequally, teaching some learners to absorb 'reduced confidence in their own epistemic worth' (Kerfoot & Bello-Nonjengele, 2023, p. 466). This observation devastatingly demonstrates why this paper calls for greater attention to children's experiences of education as a window to understanding what children are learning through current ways of being and doing in schooling. The rest of this paper does just that, exploring learners' experiences in two studies in Tanzania.

METHODOLOGY

Both of the studies that we draw upon in this paper aimed to centre the voices and experiences of learners in fields of study where we felt that these were under-represented and even overlooked (Adamson et al., 2024). Moreover, they both sought to recognise children and young people's active roles in negotiating and making meaning from their experiences.

The first study, led by Adamson, took an ethnographic approach to explore learners' negotiations of their multilingual schooling environments in two secondary schools in the Morogoro Region of Tanzania. The fieldwork took place over 8 months in 2015. Both schools were government schools—one in an urban setting and one rural school, about 35 km from town. Data generation methods included researcher-led participant observation, 51 lesson observations, semi-structured interviews involving 146 students, and informal conversations, all captured through the writing of fieldnotes. In addition, a group of 10 student researchers were supported to design and conduct their own interviews and to co-design and facilitate two workshops. The student researchers also played an important role in helping to explain emerging findings from their perspectives. Research activities were conducted in a mix of Kiswahili and English, led by the young people's preferences.

The study carried out by Brown (2022) used a spatial lens (Brown & Schweisfurth, forthcoming) to investigate learning and pedagogy in and around two urban government primary schools in the rural Kagera region in north-west Tanzania. Taking place over 5 months in 2018–19, a range of creative methods including photo-elicitation, go-alongs (Kusenbach, 2003), and drawing and mapping, and more traditional qualitative methods such as classroom observations, were used to gain insight into pupils' perceptions and experiences of learning across school, home and neighbourhood spaces. Brown worked with 21 pupils in the 4th, 5th and 6th years of school, and research activities took place in after-school or holiday 'activity clubs' and in interactions between the participant, researcher and a research associate (RA) who acted as co-facilitator and interpreter when needed. This brought in another layer of interpretation and a 'triple subjectivity' (Temple & Edwards, 2002, p. 6) as the researcher, RA and participants code-switched and interchanged between English, Kiswahili and Kihaya.

Both studies were granted ethical approval through their respective UK institutions: the Institute of Education, University of London and the University of Glasgow. In addition, both studies went through Tanzania's COSTECH application process for Research Clearance, as well as obtaining regional, district and local levels of permissions.

In addition to the dimensions of procedural ethics outlined above, both authors' studies were guided by *ethics in practice* which can be seen as the 'day-to-day ethical issues that arise in the doing of research' (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 264). For example, we considered the process of ensuring informed consent to be an ongoing conversation and frequently

re-explained and answered questions about our respective research projects, seeking support with translation into Kiswahili where necessary. We took time to try to understand the contexts of the children's lives and the schools, both to ensure that research activities did not overly burden young people and were appropriate in the context of the local 'ethos' (Abebe & Bessell, 2014, p. 130). Both authors acknowledge challenges in ensuring that their studies captured a full range of children's voices and experiences. However, we have approached the analysis and interpretation of the data with this potential imbalance at the forefront of our minds. Although we call for further research to include a wider range of experiences, we feel that the findings presented in this paper are still very useful, particularly because it is likely that the challenges considered are, in fact, amplified for many of those children whose voices were not included.

EXPERIENCING THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM IN TANZANIA

In both studies discussed in this paper, global aspirations about the value of education and its benefits were mirrored in children's discussions about the importance of schooling. Many secondary students repeated the Kiswahili phrase, 'Elimu ni ufunguo wa maisha' ('Education is the key of life'), while primary children in an Activity Club discussion asserted: 'without education you can't do anything', and positioned school as the place to 'get education and reach your dreams'. Like the discourse surrounding education and the SDGs, children viewed education as instrumental to achieving positive futures across multiple domains (see also Adamson, 2022a). Against this background of hope and determination, it was particularly upsetting to talk to children and observe the ways that they had learned to value approaches that were, in fact, undermining the experiences and capabilities that have been associated with the transformative power of education.

The value of correctness

How children perceive and experience teaching and learning was a key focus of Brown's study at the primary level. She found that children viewed teachers as key sources of knowledge, explaining: 'teachers are the ones who have a lot of knowledge', 'it is his knowledge that he acquired and gave to us', 'every day pupils need to get some new knowledge'. Similarly, in the secondary study, one urban student stated: 'All the thoughts are with the teacher so, they [students] should listen to what they say'. The learner's role, then, was to acquire knowledge by listening to the teacher and copying notes they had written on the board. At both levels, learners were found to value this focus on transmitting content that they expected to be important for examinations. In contrast to another study in Tanzania that suggested that pupils actively desire more 'learner-centred' approaches in the classroom, such as discussions and group work (Sakata et al., 2023), the primary pupils in Brown's study valued the relatively narrow pedagogical approaches of rote learning, factual short-answer exercises and error correction as they believed these would support their exam success. A group of pupils in Activity Club explained:

> [We like it when] the teacher corrects us because we get to know the questions where we made mistakes and we do them again carefully and then we get it corrected.

The value of correctness was also clearly underlined by the use of corporal punishment. Corporal punishment was frequently used in schools in both studies as a consequence for both mistakes in lesson content and transgressions in behavioural expectations. This has been widely observed in research in Tanzania (HakiElimu, 2020; Kaltenbach et al., 2018), including being identified as an influential component of the hidden curriculum (Vavrus, 2021). Such a significant issue affecting students' experiences of schooling is deserving of its own paper, but it is important to acknowledge the significance of this form of punishment for emphasising the value of getting 'the right answer'. While the hidden curriculum may be veiled behind more positive framings around 'respectful behaviour' and 'being a good student', the message about the consequences of making mistakes and getting 'the wrong answer' is clear.

Fear of making mistakes

It was a striking feature of the secondary study that the importance of an answer being correct was also underlined by the peer response to making mistakes. One rural student explained: 'If a person gets it wrong even just a little they are laughed at'. This fear of being laughed at was by far the most common explanation for learners' silence in response to teachers' questions, and many students stated that, even when they had understood, they would stay silent (see also Adamson, 2022b). The requirement to answer questions in English added an extra layer of risk. As one student explained:

> ...because it's language itself...you know, the words in English...a person is afraid of being laughed at. If they put their hand up and if they ask a question, their classmates will laugh at them.

Students were not only afraid to give an incorrect answer, but they were also afraid to ask questions or otherwise indicate that they did not know. In a context where students are simultaneously learning both a new language and new subject content, this fear is particularly debilitating.

Students suggested that laughing at mistakes was a habit they had learned and that could not be changed. Teachers were also observed using laughter and shame to try to motivate students to try harder and answer questions. For example, in an English lesson at the urban school, the teacher shouted, 'Salma, Shame on you!' when Salma didn't answer. One student in her final year at the rural secondary school went so far as to suggest that the requirement to answer questions in front of others should be removed entirely, stating:

> It would be better if you give them [students] an exercise book, they answer the question themselves using their own intelligence, and they should give it to you [the teacher]...better than raising hands

She felt this would protect students from the humiliation of failing to answer or making mistakes and being laughed at by others, but it was clear that feelings of shame were also widely experienced by students, even if they did not try to speak. One urban student explained that those students who did not have a strong background in English 'discriminate against themselves because there are others that they see know English', continuing to say that 'it contributes to failure, because they are afraid...they will put me down'. The use of English as the LoLT was a source of fear and shame as students blamed struggles in the learning process on their

individual linguistic shortcomings, but it was also a source of tension between students. This was particularly problematic because those students with more experience in English were often observed to be crucial for supporting the understanding of others, yet these inequalities in access to the LoLT further exacerbated feelings of shame and failure.

Pedagogies of disconnection

In both studies, there were clear disconnections between ways of being and doing at school and home. In the secondary study, this was most obvious in language boundaries. Although daily language practice was complex and multilingual, the use of Kiswahili was framed as an illicit practice, necessitated by students′ inability to uphold the English Only ideal. One student lamented: 'There are students, myself included, we use Kiswahili, which disturbs us a lot educationally'. Kiswahili was not considered to be a suitable language for education at secondary level. One of the urban student researchers suggested that local languages and Kiswahili were like 'traditions' that you used when visiting family 'in the village', but that this was separate from schooling where you used English to be 'modern' and 'educated'. This student was a confident English speaker, and so more able to maintain these language boundaries, but even in the rural school context, Kiswahili was seen as a marker of being less-educated. One student explained: 'But if you turn everything to Kiswahili, it means you return back to Primary School'. This created a disconnect that not only positioned familiar languages as less valuable than English, but also devalued knowledge that students may have learned at primary level, because it was in the wrong language. This took on an almost moral dimension as some students who were able to understand and use English were highly critical of their peers. For example, one of the student researchers offered an explanation for why so many other students used Kiswahili in school:

> A large percentage of students don′t yet have that consciousness, let′s say they don′t yet have good self-awareness...the teacher puts emphasis on a certain thing [using English] but they miss it. They don′t know that that thing [English] is more useful than theirs [Kiswahili].

In fact, students were painfully aware of the value of English, contributing to their feelings of shame when they had to rely on Kiswahili to navigate learning.

In the primary study, there were striking differences between the types of learning that were valued in different spaces. In contrast to the individual, exam-focused activities that were valued in school, outside of school, children described very different ways of working and learning together. A sense of shared responsibility pervaded children′s accounts of their out-of-school lives. Girls and boys from both primary schools talked openly and matter-of-factly about the farm- and home-based work they did as part of their shared responsibilities and explained why this work was important. Discussion around this out-of-classroom learning led to wide-ranging topics, including: the importance of *kusaidiana* (helping each other); *kuwa jirani mwema* (being a good neighbour); *kujitegemea* (being self-reliant); looking after the environment; health, hygiene and preventing disease; local remedies for snake bites; the breeding habits of chickens and ducks; irrigation and soil quality; the importance of agriculture in both family economies and the wider economy. These conversations were rich and diverse in content, with children integrating learning across topics in precisely the sorts of ways envisaged in discussions of ESD (e.g. in UNESCO, 2014b). Children also displayed a level of curiosity and playfulness in these

discussions that stood in stark contrast to their descriptions of classroom learning and the importance of 'getting the right answer'.

DISCUSSION

This paper sits within the context of ambitious aspirations for the transformative potential of education. It also points to a series of ongoing and complex debates about: the power of global targets and indicators to direct attention and funding to more straightforwardly measurable inputs; the types of pedagogy and learning that are necessary to support children to take active roles in securing more sustainable futures; and reasons why classroom practice in many contexts does not align with approaches identified as international 'best practices' and set out in national policies. Although the coverage of these debates in this paper has been limited, acknowledging them has been necessary to argue that, while these discussions continue, millions of children continue to attend school and experience education that not only fails to offer the types of learning that are considered central to the vision of ESD, but which, through the 'hidden curriculum', actively undermines ESD aspirations.

The data presented in the previous section were drawn from two studies in Tanzania, one in the context of primary schooling and the other at secondary level. Across both studies, it was clear that the learning process positioned the teacher as the key source of knowledge. This is not, in and of itself, a problem and we do not want to contribute to the perpetuation of an over-simplistic teacher-led/learner-centred binary (Barrett, 2007; Vavrus, 2009). However, in the examples presented in this paper, the centring of teachers as the gatekeepers of knowledge was accompanied by the exclusion of children's broader knowledges, capacities and experiences. There was significant emphasis in both studies on rote learning methods, and correctness. In the primary study, these were found to be highly valued learning strategies as pupils believed they would support their success in the Primary School Leaving Examination. In the secondary study, with the additional challenge of an unfamiliar LoLT, there was a sense that these were the only approaches that were imaginable to most students as their confidence and ability with English limited possibilities for more complex engagement with ideas, effectively excluding learners from the opportunity to meaningfully contribute to the negotiation of knowledge (Kerfoot & Bello-Nonjengele, 2023). When coupled with classroom norms that drew heavily on negative reinforcement of the value of correctness, including both corporal punishment and laughter and humiliation in response to mistakes, many students explained that they had learned that it was safer to remain silent or to restrict their contribution to repetitive, chorused answers (see also Kuchah et al., 2022; Rubagumya, 2003).

These restricted pedagogies and ways of being and doing in the classroom not only fail to support, but actively undermine, the development of competencies and attributes that are identified as important in the ESD agenda, for example, 'critical thinking', 'problem-solving', 'coping with complexity' and 'thinking systemically and creatively' (UNESCO, 2022). It is notable that these skills are also at the centre of the Tanzanian competency-based curriculum, which sits within a constructivist view of learning, where new knowledge and skills build upon, and are connected to, existing understandings and experiences (Kalsoom, 2019; Mosha, 2012). In the primary study, it was striking that children did demonstrate, and clearly enjoyed, many of the behaviours and skills associated with ESD in their lives outside of formal schooling. However, these collaborative approaches, which emphasised an interdependence with others and with nature, were broadly excluded from the classroom. In a study

of early childhood education in Tanzania, Mligo (2016; p. 365) goes so far as to suggest that 'children might be better off at home, learning within the family and local community, than in an overcrowded classroom with an inappropriate curriculum approach and untrained staff'. Although it is important to challenge deficit portrayals of teachers who experience a range of structural and individual constraints (see also Tao, 2013), the data in this paper certainly lead us to question the extent to which formal schooling, as it is currently practised, is able to nurture the experiences and skills needed for ESD.

At the secondary level, the requirement to use English as the LoLT further cemented the disconnection between school-based learning and students' broader life experiences. Although a shared familiar language, Kiswahili, played a crucial role in facilitating understanding, this was framed as a regrettable necessity with students (many of whom were multilingual in two or more African languages) blamed as being 'linguistically deficient' in relation to the 'English Only' ideal (McKinney, 2017, p. 63). The role of school language policies and practices in excluding and devaluing familiar, local languages and knowledges has been widely acknowledged and criticised (Manyike & Shava, 2018; wa Thiong'o, 1986). However, this paper has powerfully shown what this means at the individual level, as learners experienced pervasive feelings of shame and were discouraged from speaking in class by fear of being laughed at by peers. It is striking that the Berlin Declaration on ESD (UNESCO, 2022) does not explicitly mention the role of language, however, local languages are inseparable from the Indigenous knowledge that the Declaration commits to recognise and respect (UNESCO, 2022, p. 4; see also Manyike & Shava, 2018). Moreover, students' experiences of learning in English, presented here, clearly undermine the aspiration for 'sustainable development based on more just, inclusive, caring and peaceful relationships' (UNESCO, 2022, p. 3). Students with less knowledge and confidence in English were highly reliant on their peers to help with translations and correct answers. However, rather than fostering valuable collaboration, the unequal access to the LoLT was a source of tension between peers, and between teachers and learners, and for many, amplified their sense of shame.

This raises two significant concerns that require further research. The first is the extent to which schooling in an unfamiliar language can currently be considered an emotionally safe environment. Although safety is considered under SDG target 4.a, the indicators focus on physical safety. Yet, the data presented in this paper suggest that students, even if asked, would be unlikely to highlight their feelings of fear and shame, as the 'hidden curriculum' has taught that these negative emotions are due to their own shortcomings, and must be endured. Since it is estimated that up to 80% of children in sub-Saharan African may not have access to education in a language that they understand (World Bank, 2021), this should be an urgent concern. Secondly, there is a need to better understand how the use of unfamiliar languages interacts with global aspirations for equity in and through education. Education is often accredited with the potential to level opportunities across a range of dimensions of difference, including gender (SDG5) and socioeconomic circumstances (SDG10) (UNESCO, 2014a). Moreover, the Berlin Declaration on ESD asserts that schools should 'become living laboratories' for 'equity and gender equality' (UNESCO, 2022, p. 7). However, UNESCO itself acknowledges that 'too often [...] today's schools serve to entrench inequalities and widen disparities that need to be unlearned and corrected' (2021, p. 96). This paper has briefly highlighted issues relating to unequal access to English and the differential impact on learners' opportunities for learning, but there are other recent studies that also point to intersections between language inequality and other structural inequalities, including gender (Milligan et al., 2023) and race (Kerfoot & Bello-Nonjengele, 2023). The fact that language-in-education policies and practices both interact with, and exacerbate, other existing inequalities, further strengthens the call to bring questions of language into the foreground.

Ultimately, this paper argues that, in order to understand what children are learning in education, we must look beyond assessments of literacy and numeracy, and give much greater priority to listening to children's experiences. It is often asserted that education is a key driver of transformation across multi-dimensional goals, and children are key actors in this process, positioned as 'change agents for sustainable development' (UNESCO, 2022, p. 2). But, importantly, Uprichard (2008, p. 311) reminds us that 'children do become adults and the kinds of adults they are likely to become are shaped by the kinds of childhoods they are experiencing today'. This paper has demonstrated that the form of schooling that children in these two studies in Tanzania were experiencing resulted in learning that actively undermined global aspirations for ESD. Considering the large number of children who are learning in similar contexts, this should be an urgent concern. More than pedagogy simply being the 'missing ingredient' in quality education, we have shown that the continued reliance on restrictive pedagogies, including the use of an unfamiliar LoLT, contribute to the 'hidden curriculum' that powerfully shapes children's experiences of education. This 'hidden curriculum' positions fear, shame and struggle as a necessary part of learning, values memorisation of knowledge and correctness over curiosity and collaboration, and excludes children's broader life experiences and knowledges, devaluing them in relation to the language and content of formal education. However, not only do existing practices emphatically undermine global aspirations relating to the benefits of education, they also devalue the effort and determination that many children are investing in schooling, often in extremely challenging circumstances, because they too hope that education will be the 'key' to unlocking better futures. In efforts to transform education to support more equitable and sustainable futures for all, policy makers, education planners and researchers must not allow issues of educational processes to be overlooked. Creating a central role for children's accounts is crucial for understanding how education is experienced, and what children are actually learning.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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