

Scrutinising the Global Learning Crisis in Education: A Cartography of Literature Using the Pedagogy of Crisis Framework Informed by Critical Realism

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Abstract

While ‘crisis’ has become a recurrent theme in comparative education (Ahmed, 2023), recent reports by international organisations have intensified this framing, presenting the learning crisis as both economic and moral. Poor educational quality is increasingly linked to missed opportunities in employment, poverty reduction, democratic governance, and peace (Elfert & Ydesen, 2023; UNICEF, 2017; World Bank, 2017). Yet, scholars working from political economy perspectives have raised concerns over the limitations of prevailing theoretical and empirical frameworks in unpacking the underlying causes of the so-called Global Learning Crisis (GLC) (Clarke, 2022; Hickey & Hossain, 2019; Paglayan, 2024). A striking example is Lant Pritchett’s claim that “nearly everything that is known about education reforms — everything that donors are bringing in as solutions — won’t work” (Khalid, 2020), a view that resonates with broader critiques of the fields overreliance on tools like large-scale assessments and experimental methods, which allegedly reduce complex systems to black boxes (Clarke, 2022).

Our paper engages with these concerns by approaching the GLC through a Pedagogy of Crisis framework grounded in the stratified ontology and principle of emergence in Critical Realism (hence, the PoC-CR) (Knio, 2018). Given its explicit distinction between emergent properties across the empirical, actual, and real domains of reality, the PoC-CR enables the disentangling of symptoms, mediators, and generative mechanisms of crises. It also allows exploration of how different ontological assumptions shape divergent readings of crisis in the education literature, and how such assumptions enable or constrain learning *in, into, from, and about* crisis (Jessop, 2018). From this perspective, poor learning outcomes are not simply seen as policy failures but as emergent phenomena rooted in the interplay of material and ideational forces activated through human agency in spatio-temporal contexts.

Operationalising the PoC-CR, we construct a cartography of GLC literature, identifying three dominant strands: (1) crisis as external rupture or critical juncture; (2) crisis discourse as constructed and politically instrumental; and (3) crisis as systemic contradiction and exhaustion of neoliberal governance. We map how each strand positions

crisis across different levels of reality—focusing variously on symptoms, discursive formations, or deep structures—and how each introduces distinct understandings of social relations at the individual, organisational, institutional, or societal levels (Knio & Jessop, 2018).

Supported in our findings, we argue that none of the analysed perspectives on the GLC fully addresses the interrelations between the ontological layers in which education systems are embedded. From a PoC-CR standpoint, this constitutes a significant analytical limitation for generating comprehensive understandings and lessons for future research and policy. We conclude by offering methodological principles grounded in Knio's (2023, 2024) recent work, particularly his critique and enhancement of realist social theory via morphogenetic analysis, to guide further inquiry.

This contribution speaks directly to IACR 2025's focus on present and future societal challenges by highlighting the importance of ontological depth and scalar-relational analysis for understanding the systemic failure of education systems. We contend it offers a promising methodological pathway for disentangling the complex, interwoven dimensions of crisis in education and their connection to broader challenges related to growth, peace, and democracy.

Key words: Global learning crisis, pedagogy of crisis, stratified ontology, emergence