The "Global Learning Crisis": The Classroom View from Kanchipuram, India

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"Global learning crisis" narratives, in focusing on the "proximate determinants" of the crisis, represent a welcome "classroom turn" in international education and development. Extant learning crisis literatures are problematic, however, as their homogenizing gaze distorts how teachers and students co-constitute classrooms as locally meaningful learning spaces. Drawing on anthropological approaches in comparative education, this article addresses the "learning crisis" in a middle-school classroom in a weavers' neighborhood in Kanchipuram. Constituted in an elaborate "notebook economy," this classroom was an inventive response that not only accommodated students' material cultures and social-educational disadvantages but also affected their belonging in a resource-scarce public education system. If the learning it afforded was disdained in "learning crisis" narratives, it was nevertheless relevant for students, readily translated into educationally unintensive assembly-line jobs. In producing contempt for such classrooms, "learning crisis" narratives merely distract from—and thus entrench—the deeply unequal economic and educational development that necessitated the notebook economy in the first place.

That the vast majority of primary-school-age children in the Global South now spend a third of their day in school classrooms attests to the success of global and national mobilizations for educational access. In India, for instance, gross enrollment in elementary school rose from 82 percent in 2000 to 97 percent in 2015 under the aegis of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), the country's Education for All (EFA) program (Government of India 2016).[1] Post-EFA analyses, however, have raised concerns about what (learning) occurred in these classrooms: the EFA Global Monitoring Reports (GMRs), for instance, warned of a "global learning crisis," with 250 million children "not learning even basic literacy and

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[1] Given the constitutional mandate for 8 years of free schooling, government statistics in the context of EFA refer to the "elementary" school years from first to eighth grade.

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numeracy skills" (UNESCO 2014, 18). In India, the report added, more than half of primary school children had failed to learn "the basics" (UNESCO 2014, 192). This "learning crisis" narrative was echoed by national and international organizations (World Bank 2018; Pratham 2019) and entrenched as the "dominant discourse" of contemporary educational development (Sriprakash et al. 2019, 676). This dominance was reinforced in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic: the joint World Bank, UNESCO, and UNICEF (2021, 9) report titled *The State of the Global Education Crisis* begins by noting how pandemic-related disruptions to schools "amplif[ied] the pre-existing learning crisis."

Such learning crisis rhetoric is not harmless: it offers a particular framing of the problem that promotes or justifies particular blame games and solutions. Most notably, the rhetoric translates the learning crisis into a primarily classroom and classroom-proximate issue of inadequate or inappropriate teaching and learning practices (Schweisfurth 2023). Given this "classroom turn" (to coin a phrase) in international development education, what do we know about "real" classrooms caught up in the learning crisis? Very little, suggests a review of literature.

On the one hand, international and comparative educationists have clearly taken the global learning crisis on board: a Scopus query identified about 50 articles in the discipline that self-consciously referenced a learning crisis to describe schooling in developing-country contexts.[2] Four out of five articles published since 2015 sought to measure, explain, or intervene in the learning crisis—in effect, treating the learning crisis as a taken-for-granted, self-evident fact.[3] Relying largely on quantitative analyses (about two-thirds of the articles), they sought to (*a*) identify factors that contributed to the learning crisis (typically, student-, household-, school-, and system-level variables such as first-generation students, home literacy environments, teaching quality, or school accountability), or (*b*) they attempted to measure the impact of particular interventions (such as early learning programs, math remediation, teacher incentives, school management systems, or e-learning) on the learning crisis.

Classrooms, on the other hand, barely made an appearance in this learning crisis literature. Where they showed up (in two articles), the focus was on discrete variables (such as the physical classroom environment or particular student/teacher characteristics) that effectively flattened classrooms into containers of those predetermined variables. Such neglect is, perhaps, only to be expected, given the predominance of inputs-outcomes models of schooling in international development education. The World Bank, for example, a key player for more than 50 years, "has paid little attention to what happens in

[2] I gratefully acknowledge Ayushi Gupta (Azim Premji University) for her support with Scopus searches.

[3] More recently, critiques (nine articles) have also emerged in the field that noted the reductive, reproductive, racist, colonizing, and ableist tendencies of learning crisis discourses.

the classroom, leaving education as a black box" (Klees 2012, 58). The neglect is problematic, however, when the classroom turn is celebrated by truisms such as "If education reform doesn't change what happens in the classroom, it cannot change outcomes" (Pritchett 2019, 201). When education reformers are, in fact, largely unaware of what happens in classrooms in a learning crisis or otherwise, it is unclear what changes they propose or why. This article attempts an intervention in this regard, drawing on anthropological approaches in comparative education that seek to study learning where it is "actually occurring" (Masemann 1976, 373): not only reaching beyond formal or a priori definitions of educational variables and practices but also making visible daily classroom practices unfamiliar (or overfamiliar) to reformers in a hurry to push change (Erickson 2010).

Unlike the learning crisis literature, which, when it considers classrooms, slices them up into discretized and decontextualized "factors," classroom ethnography is anti-fragmentary: factors, in this approach, are mutually and simultaneously shaped by teachers and students enacting official as well as informal (and locally meaningful) educational practices (Watson-Gegeo 1997). Any "learning," then, is jointly constructed as part of the sociocultural processes of the classroom and occurs in terms that are not so much determined by education systems as negotiated by teachers and students as they respond to systemic demands but also local cultures and constraints. The learning crisis literature, then, not only misjudges the cultural and contextual nature of learning but also marginalizes those forms of learning that are significant and available to teachers and students where they are. This is paradoxical—and problematic, silencing the very teachers and students closest to any learning (crises). Classroom ethnography, in contrast, is premised on taking teachers and students seriously and on their own terms. To paraphrase Varenne (2008, 358), distinct to anthropological ways of knowing (about) classrooms—via participant observation as a particular form of relatively ungoverned interaction—is giving "classroom-natives" the chance to teach us what is most important for them.

It is in this spirit that I describe an eighth-grade classroom in Kanchipuram, a municipal town in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, at the heart of the learning crisis—an ASER survey at the time found that 65 percent of eighth-grade students in Tamil Nadu could read at only the second-grade level (Pratham 2013).[4] What did the teachers and students in this classroom think they were doing when large-scale assessments suggested they were apparently having a learning crisis—what did they constitute as "learning"? I attempt an answer, drawing on more than 300 hours of participant observation in the classroom

[4] The Annual Status of Education Reports, or ASER, published by Pratham, have raised the alarm about poor learning in (government) schools in India, to acclaim as well as controversy.

and more than 50 interviews with the students (and their parents) and teachers who made up the classroom.[5]

Background

Indigenous Childhood Trajectories in Kanchipuram

A historically important weaving center in India, Kanchipuram is renowned for the eponymous *kanjeevaram* sari, woven in silk and gold-*zari* yarn, on household-based handlooms in the area. The primary means of livelihood, weaving is also integral to Kanchipuram's social organization, with households clustered in "weavers' neighborhoods" and identified by their "attachments" to master-weaver networks and silk-weaver cooperatives. As Arterburn (1982, 36) describes, weaving was simply "the way of life" in Kanchipuram; adding, "more children work than attend school." At 6 years of age, they started as "helpers" on the looms at home: tasked with collecting broken strands of silk and zari thread—later exchanged for money—their primary lesson was in the material value of inputs. When 8 or 9, they sat beside a parent on the loom, learning to "pick" the smaller shuttle for the interlocking *korvai* technique unique to the *kanjeevaram* sari. Once adept with the shuttle, boys in particular headed out to apprentice with master weavers in the neighborhood, to be initiated into the lifelong disciplines and production relations ("attachments") of weaving. When tall enough to reach the pedal on the loom, they began practicing "picking," "shedding," and "beating"—the three foundational skills of weaving—till, approved by the master weaver, they branched out as weavers for hire. "Rotating" from one master weaver to another, they built the social and material capital to then set up as "independent weavers" with their own looms. In Kanchipuram's loom-based trajectories, learning and earning—production and pedagogy—were thus tightly and unexceptionally woven together in childhood.

Looms to Classrooms in Kanchipuram

With the publication of the Human Rights Watch (1996) report, however—evocatively titled *The Small Hands of Slavery*—these indigenous educational trajectories came under global scrutiny, and children in Kanchipuram were swiftly lamented and labeled as lost to education and in need of rescue (see Thangaraj 2019). In response, India's National Child Labour Project (NCLP) began targeting weavers' neighborhoods through "child labor raids" to keep children off the looms. In 2004, the raids were supplemented by the INDUS

[5] This effort was part of a longer, community-based, ethnographic study I conducted with "rescued" children in a weavers' neighborhood in Kanchipuram; funded, in part, by an International Dissertation Research Fellowship (Social Science Research Council, New York) and the Scott Kloeck-Jenson Fellowship.

(Indo-US) Child Labour Project that, as awareness campaigns declared, aimed to move children from "exploitation to education."[6] The INDUS modus operandi was a three-step process: children were "rescued" from the looms, "rehabilitated" via "bridge courses," and then "mainstreamed" in nearby government schools.[7]

When I first arrived in Kanchipuram in the summer of 2009, I had been charged by the NCLP's State Cell with documenting the "success stories" of rescued children—girls, in particular, now working in special economic zones (SEZs). Carrying smart handbags and wearing "modern" clothes to work, as their teachers gushed, these girls had seemingly seamlessly moved from the looms into schools and then onto multinational-company assembly lines in SEZs. It was to trace these new trajectories that I returned to Kanchipuram (2011–13) as a researcher, to live and learn among weavers as I followed their children from looms to classrooms and beyond.

The Classroom in Kanchipuram

A Classroom in the "Lead School" in a Weavers' Neighborhood

A significant part of my time in Kanchipuram was spent at a government middle school designated as an INDUS "lead school" where rescued children were mainstreamed—in particular, in one of its terminal eighth-grade classrooms, in the best-performing "A" section, where project staff had directed me to showcase their efforts. The vast majority of 8-A's 53 students (27 girls and 26 boys) came from weaving households in the neighborhood, even if they periodically denounced the looms in poems and songs as part of "child labor awareness generation activities" at the school. Although apprenticeships on the looms were no longer available to these students, they routinely contributed to the household weaving economy, reeling silk yarn for their parents or—when they needed money—for master weavers nearby. This need for money—to have *kai-la kaas* (money in hand), as students put it—was roundly and frequently condemned by lead school teachers.[8] "Doing chores at home was alright, but why did they need cash at this age?" Mrs. P. had muttered angrily. For students, however, the need for cash was keenly felt, familiar as they were with the long-standing childhood institution of *inam-kaas* (award money) on

[6] The INDUS Child Labour Project is funded by the US Department of Labor and implemented in Kanchipuram by the NCLP, the International Labour Organisation (ILO), and SSA, India's EFA Program (INDUS-ILO 2006).

[7] Bridge courses, where children spent anywhere up to 2 years, were run on shoestring budgets, with very low-paid staff and very minimal infrastructure.

[8] In quoting my Tamil-speaking participants, I have used English translations, while transliterating some key Tamil words to capture the vibrancy of their speech or indicate their particular significance in local contexts. When participants used English phrases or words—"all pass," or "jolly," etc.—I have kept them in.

the looms. Paid every 2 weeks by master weavers, in addition to their apprentice wages, *inam-kaas* was children's by right, to spend as they pleased—on the innumerable small treats (biscuits, *murukkus*, *sundal*, "cone-ices," toffees) so key to childhood joys.

Working for cash in hand was, therefore, not only familiar to students but also fun—"jolly" in their words—the means to chocolates, soft drinks, and snacks that, shared with friends, lit up even the longest school day. Boys, in particular, were often tempted away from the classroom—especially during festival and wedding seasons, when work opportunities and mouth-watering treats abounded; or, more recently, by odd jobs in the booming biryani shops and "fancy stores" in town.[9] Classrooms—even the best-performing "A" section—were often missing the boys who had "escaped," as they excitedly described it ("running past the staff room! scaling the school gate!"), to look for work. I once calculated that 48 of the 53 students in 8-A had undertaken some form or other of remunerative work in the preceding month. If children in weavers' neighborhoods had been rescued from the looms into classrooms, work remained a regular, if now more hidden, part of their lives—the means of material returns and sensory delights that the classroom could not afford.

The "All Pass" RTE Classroom

That 53 students attended the 8-A classroom in an "area of high child labor concentration" owed to India's Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009—a reflection of its progressive provisions but also its deeply conservative provisioning. The RTE Act, following a decade of EFA-mandated universal primary education efforts—and 60 years since the constitutional mandate for universal elementary education—provided free and compulsory education for all children aged 6–14 in the country (Government of India 2009). Middle school classrooms like 8-A were not only "free" now and accessible to 11-to-14-year-olds out of school; they were also to offer "quality" education in line with RTE norms for teachers and facilities. With inadequate provisioning for RTE (Bose et al. 2020), however, and compounded by chronic underinvestment in public education, government schools offered "little more than access to a building called the school" that still awaited "an ingredient called quality" (Kumar 2010, 11).[10] Those students who could swiftly exit such buildings for (low-fee) private schooling, effectively produced many government school classrooms as "vacated spaces," deserted by relatively advantaged socioeconomic groups.[11]

At the lead school in Kanchipuram, neither RTE-mandated infrastructural norms nor adequate teacher numbers were met, not even by an extended

[9] Gender, in the neighborhood, was primarily a spatial performance: whereas boys roamed freely as a sign of their emerging masculinities, girls were relatively cloistered in indoor spaces.

[10] Despite the repeated promises of successive governments, an allocation of 6 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP) for education has never been achieved, with allocations persistently below 3.5 percent.

[11] M. Vijayabaskar (faculty, Madras Institute of Development), personal interview, February 2012.

deadline in 2013: 53 students shared a rather bare classroom where the only furniture was a battered desk and chair (for teachers). Although well lit by windows and large enough for 53 students (and their school bags), the cracked cement floor—on which students sat—remained cool, even in the 40 degree Celsius heat when the fans failed to work. Students did not mind: predominantly from the poorer weaving households in the neighborhood to the resource-poor, the classroom was not unlike their own one- or two-room homes.

If 8-A was a resource-poor, vacated classroom, it was also—and more consequentially for a lead school—a "no detention" classroom. The RTE Act required not only that schools enroll children in age-appropriate classrooms (irrespective of their academic histories) but also that they not detain any students (irrespective of their academic performance) during their elementary schooling years. Given the significant numbers of out-of-school and working children in the country (INDUS Child Labor Project 2007), this so-called no-detention policy (NDP) was one of the act's most progressive (if contested) measures, purposed to cut drop-out rates and nurture a stress-free learning environment (Sharma 2016).[12] NCLP staff in Kanchipuram, faced with the recurrent challenge of students dropping out of school just before or after an important exam, cheered such "all pass" classrooms: rescued children would not only be mainstreamed in classrooms with same-aged peers but also they could now expect to move up with them at the end of the school year, irrespective of their exam results.

Lead school teachers were less sanguine about such all pass classrooms, however, fearing that they disincentivized (teacher and) student effort. As Mrs. P., the most critical of their number, described bitterly, "He scores 20 marks and we give him 40 marks extra and write 'promoted' in his report card—he comes to us from primary school knowing little, and we pass him on just like that for high school teachers to deal with." With six teachers shared across eight classrooms, teachers not only had an impossible task on their hands but also their challenges were compounded by increasing "official duties": administrative tasks in connection with the 40-plus state "welfare schemes" (such as the distribution of notebooks, bus passes, scholarships, or uniforms). Designed to keep (variously disadvantaged) students in the classroom, these schemes also, paradoxically, resulted in "reducing the time [teachers] actually spend on academic tasks with children in the classroom" (Nawani 2017, 24). Indeed, as I learned for myself, 8-A was not only a resource-poor and vacated space but it was also an interrupted classroom, with lessons frequently disrupted when teachers were summoned by higher authorities.

Given the broader policy challenges that produced such a classroom, and given the material-cultural definitions of education in weavers' neighborhoods, how was "learning" constituted and produced by students and teachers in the lead school classroom? What passed for learning in the all pass RTE classroom?

[12] NDP was reversed in 2017, in response to fears that it was adversely affecting educational quality by incentivizing teacher and students to take it easy.

The Notebook Economy

The Significance of Notebooks

"Yaar da innum notebook vangala?" (Who hasn't bought the notebook still?), a teacher demanded angrily, adding, "Stand up!" As student after student slowly shuffled to their (bare) feet, I was witnessing something of a daily ritual in 8-A. It was July, 6 weeks into the school year—and students were still missing notebooks, much to the loud, often performative, frustration of teachers. How were they to teach students who did not have the requisite notebooks? Shaking their heads, and occasionally their fists, they roundly berated everyone, from a lackadaisical government to irresponsible parents and primary school teachers, to the students themselves. Mrs. P. had expected better of 8-A—"Kazhudhai!" (Donkeys!) was her bellowed verdict now. "Why even bother coming to school," Mrs. D. had tut-tutted more even-temperedly—how were they to work out math problems when half the classroom did not have their notebooks? If Mr. S. blamed the teachers at the feeder primary school for failing to inculcate even such basic disciplines, then Lakshmi, a student group leader, directed her ire at her classmates: When they remembered to carry their lunch every day, she demanded, how did they then forget their notebooks?[13] Six weeks into the school year, and so much daily angst over notebooks, I had mused then, half-bewildered.

The state, at the time, did provide free notebooks for students from disadvantaged groups; but because they were typically small and often delayed, they were disdained by teachers and students.[14] It was the "big note," as classroom patois had it, that was the primary currency of the classroom, with students expected to have at least two per subject, for classwork and homework. Some went the extra mile: Rekha, for instance, had 26 big notes—26! She proudly laid them out for me to count—befitting her position as a "group leader." Relatively expensive, the big notes also signaled that her family was relatively well-off. Indeed, students sometimes described households in terms of their capacity to buy big notes; Mano, for instance, astutely distinguishing *coolie* (daily-wage) households, who staggered the purchase of notebooks, from their independent weaver compatriots who could afford the full set. For parents, buying their children notebooks on time—"whether by labor or loan," as Lakshmi's mother had averred—was their *kadami* (duty), a material proof of their care. It was how Selvi, a coolie weaver, contributed to her daughter's education: she could not read enough to help with homework, but she could work extra to purchase notebooks on time.

Students, too, did their part to supplement parental provision: when Ranji and Rosi worked weekends at the *appalam* company or Subbu helped out at the

[13] Students and teachers have been pseudonymized as per Institutional Review Board (IRB) requirements; though many students were disappointed I was not using their real names—they had hoped I would share their stories with the "big leaders" responsible for policy.

[14] State-supplied notebooks were the smaller, A5-size kind, used for test taking or for "rough work."

mango orchard, they justified their earnings as "note-*kaas*," notebook money. Indeed, in a classroom where students earning money was anathema, working to buy notebooks was the notable exception: Mrs. K. was once moved to talk about a student's "interest" in studies as marked by her efforts to earn money for notebooks; and Ganya, a strapping 14-year-old in 8-A, spoke openly of weaving *sada-regam* (plain-patterned) saris over the summer because they had paid for his notebooks.

In sum, notebooks were multivalently significant in 8-A: not only indicating household status but also driving a moral economy that justified students' work and marked dutiful parents, interested students, and conscientious teachers. And yet that was only the half of it: in 8-A, the classroom and its student-subjects were a written production—rather like the "document raj" of colonial bureaucracy—reassuringly reproduced and sustained every day in the notebook economy.[15]

A Classroom Constituted by "Copying"

Notebooks materialized the primary mode of production in the classroom: students writing hard and writing constantly, as they tried to keep pace with teachers and group leaders who wrote on the blackboard. As a night school teacher in the area wryly commented about my research, "The teacher writes at his desk, the group leader writes on the blackboard, the students write in their notebooks—and now, you will sit at the back, looking at the students, and write as well?" Indeed, most of my time in the classroom was spent recording students writing—or "copying," in classroom lingo. Urged on by teachers and group leaders, or even when passing the time in the absence of a teacher, students in the classroom were constantly copying. Copiously copying. Ceaselessly copying. I sought to distract myself from the boredom of watching students copying by thinking up alliterations.

One afternoon, as group leaders supervised students writing out a Tamil lesson, Balu's plaintive question, "Do we need to copy this?" infuriated Mrs. P.:

> Who loses if you don't copy? Me? Should I copy this or not, he asks. [*Shaking her head*] What a needless question! [*To me*] Did you hear him? A child is in school, and he asks such a question! We are writing on the blackboard for his sake, and he asks, do we need to copy? The test is a week away, and I have written out the main points—but do you see him sitting with his notebook? Does he even have a notebook? When we were children, didn't we sit and write and complete our lessons? But look at him now, sitting here in class—and he asks, do we need to copy?

Copying was, thus, the essential classroom performance. An ideal classroom, as Mrs. M. had described when I interviewed her, was one where "students wrote well in class and finished their homework." One morning, when Mrs. K., arriving

[15] As the historian Raman (2012) describes, writing and scribing took on the form of a moral vocation in South India, (literally) papering over the anxieties and contradictions of colonial rule while producing an authoritative genre of knowledge.

late, found students quietly copying, she beamed: "*Nalla pasanga* [good children], sitting and writing, in such an orderly manner."

As the familiar form of the classroom, copying was remarkably resilient—as the following excerpt—from my observation notes—illustrates:

> First period—English.[16] Students in white sports uniform (but new student Kumar in brown "un-uniform," in his words). A full classroom—six straight rows, neatly marked by lined-up school bags. Mrs. K. walks in—extended "Good morning, teacher!" She's popular, and students are full of enthusiasm. Possibility is in the air!
>
> Mrs. K., right away (no attendance): "Have you studied 'degrees of comparison'?" "*Illa* [no], miss!" Students are loud. Mrs. K.: "Do you know my house? It is big." She writes "big" on the blackboard. "Big," students repeat exuberantly. "But my neighbor's house is bigger," Mrs. K. chuckles at her joke. Students again, louder, earnest: "Bigger."
>
> Mrs. K. divides the blackboard into three columns. Students rummage for pens and notebooks. "Superlative," Mrs. K. points to the third column—"like superstar." Superstar! students echo excitedly—they are Rajni fans.[17]
>
> 10 minutes: Students—still attentive. Mrs. K. writes and explains more adjectives (small, tall, short); students repeat after her, then copy.
>
> 12 minutes: Mrs. K.'s cellphone rings—it's the "office," she says, handing her English Reader to Lakshmi (group leader)—"Please copy." She takes the call in the corridor.
>
> 15 minutes: Lakshmi writes on the blackboard; students copy. Some chatter, about Rajni. Also, movement: Kumar (new student), conspicuous in his brown shirt, shuffles back from the first to the third row. The first row has shrunk, but Guru (group leader) has moved up to join it. Full-fledged Rajni discussion at the back. Bala comes over to sit next to me: "Have you watched *Padayappa* [Rajni film]?" A fight breaks out over a ruler among the girls in the last row. Lakshmi shouts: Shut up, everybody!
>
> 20 minutes: Bodies migrate to favored spots—group leaders to the front, the rest moving back. Lots of banter; some loud/angry words. But hands are still moving across notebooks, dutifully copying. Girls: semicircles forming at the back. Boys: more scattered.
>
> 22 minutes: Mrs. K. returns, confers with Lakshmi, and hands her a "study guide"—students are to copy out an exercise. When Lakshmi cleans the blackboard, Mani howls in despair—he is yet to finish copying.
>
> 25 minutes: Mrs. K. leaves the classroom, promising to return to mark attendance. There are other teachers in the corridor now—an impromptu conference.
>
> 30 minutes: Class started well—back to copying now. And chatter.
>
> 40 minutes: The group leaders at the front are competing to finish. The rest: a chattering hodgepodge of limbs, still bent over notebooks, pens scratching away.
>
> 45 minutes: The bell goes; second period.

As tedious and tiresome as I found all this copying, the students did not seem to mind, largely preferring it to other forms of participation. One day early in the school year, when Mrs. S. had shushed the group leaders to call on Ganga instead, the usual chatter at the back stilled into an uncomfortable silence. The seconds ticked by nervously as Ganga stood up, fumbling with her notebook and refusing to look up from it. When Mrs. S. finally turned to Raj, a group

[16] As was typical, the English lesson was conducted in Tamil, with key words/phrases in English.

[17] Rajnikanth, doyen of Tamil cinema, is reverently nicknamed Superstar.

leader, the classroom returned to its familiar copying form with palpable relief, the gentle drone of chatter starting up at the back again.

Copying, students agreed with teachers, was the essential classroom performance. Indeed, when students sought me out, it was to show their notebooks off: the straight margins drawn painstakingly, the underlined headings, the religious symbols atop each page, the most recent teacher tick marks, but even more, the sheer volume of copy they had produced. "See how many lines I have written, see—line by line," Kala had once urged, her fingers lovingly running down the notebook page.

Participation Structures in the Classroom

Participation in the notebook economy indexed students as particular classroom subjects—as group leaders, "rogues," or as the "dull" middle students—and constituted their belongings and relations to each other and to the classroom itself.

Group leaders.—Group leaders were identified by their well-maintained and "up-to-date" notebooks: distinguished by numerous teacher tick marks and a "good" or two that denoted on-time completion of writing tasks; and to be showcased when higher authorities (or the occasional parent) visited. Thus signified by their notebooks as *padikara pasanga* (studious children), teachers had named 10 students as group leaders, responsible for (the notebooks of) groups of four to five other students. When teachers assigned writing work, it was group leaders who brokered the classroom, their notebooks—once signed off by teachers—serving as the authoritative version for their groups to copy. By controlling the circulation of notebooks, they effectively managed the classroom: not only directing their groups but also deciding whose notebooks were ready for submission or who deserved a telling-off from teachers for poorly maintained notebooks.

Rogues.—Although notebooks were constantly on students' minds, for those who frequently missed classes—the boys escaping for work, in particular—maintaining up-to-date notebooks was such a Sisyphean task, they had largely opted out. Strategically disappearing when notebooks were checked or preferring punishment (typically, standing outside the classroom), these students were the "rogues," as Mrs. K. called them: the bane of group leaders, even as they were grudgingly admired by other peers. A dozen in number, including two girls,[18] they found the copying mode of the classroom "painful":[19] as onerous as it

[18] This skewed ratio reflected gendered mobilities in Kanchipuram: unlike the rogue boys, girls could not roam about openly in search of work. Whereas the boys often escaped for an hour or two, the girls missed entire school days, preferring chores at home or working for their neighbors for pocket money.

[19] As the historian Nita Kumar (2006) has described of the subaltern/provincial child, encountering the unfamiliar school-space as part of colonial education projects.

was (monetarily) unproductive/unrewarding, any significance earned in the notebook economy did not seem worth it. Although the RTE, as implemented, did little to assuage their pain, the NDP kept them on the rolls, their largely empty notebooks a tangible if tenuous sign of their (rogue) belonging in the classroom.

"Dull" middle students.—The majority of students—"not geniuses, not rogues, but middle students," as the assistant headmaster had described—responded earnestly to the classroom notebook economy. Made up of more girls (20) than boys (11), these middle students—despite their poor penmanship and inadequate notebooks—persisted in the pursuit of up-to-date notebooks to appease group leaders and teachers. They copied throughout the school day: not only during teacher instruction but even free periods, when it was a point of honor to remain in the classroom, copying alongside their friends.

Despite such effortful participation in the classroom, middle students were rarely mentioned by teachers in their interviews with me—unlike group leaders and rogues, who teachers spoke about often and animatedly, with varying degrees of appreciation or exasperation. When I asked them about it, teachers apologetically noted that middle students kept a low—a "dull"—profile in the classroom. Beyond getting their notebooks checked, they kept teachers at a distance, preferring to be left to their own (writing) devices. They were not scared of their teachers, insisted Kala, a middle student, even as she conceded that she and her friends did not often speak to teachers or, indeed, speak up in class. But, as she pointed out with a smile, they did speak to each other a lot in the classroom. Their approach was, in her words, "Let the group leaders sit at the front and talk [to teachers], and the rest of us can sit at the back and be our own family." That, she added, "was 'jolly' for us."

Indeed, where group leaders enjoyed classroom status and the rogues, their earnings and escapes, the dull middle students found their jolliness in the classroom chatter that denoted kinship with each other. What they talked about, Rubi assured me, was "nothing serious—just day-to-day stuff, like which relative visited, or what we had for dinner, or which sibling we fought with." Their conversations turned to television serials sometimes, but it was such *ur kadhai* (neighborhood gossip) that was the staple—interrupted, of course, by frequent and intense discussions about the merits of a bewildering array of snacks. Almost as tedious (to my adult ears) as their constant copying, these interminable conversations—about which toffees/biscuits/soft drinks/chocolates/ice creams/chips were current favorites—were thoroughly disdained by group leaders as a "time waste." To middle students, however, it was this inane chatter that identified "close friends" and "best friends," signifying kinships that—to the exclusion of group leaders—sustained their (jolly) participation in the classroom.

The drone of chatter in the classroom rivaled notebook production, a constant accompaniment throughout the school day. Indeed, as I was increasingly

drawn into the chatter that marked the back rows, I began to realize that it was these conversational exchanges that enabled (rather than distracted from) the copious copying of middle students: an affective grease that oiled their effortful participation in the notebook economy, its kinship bonds overwriting their lower classroom status.

Discussion

Classroom Performance

It was the notebook economy that gave form and meaning to the best-performing 8-A classroom, sustaining the day-to-day participation of its 53 students—as group leaders, middle students, and rogues. In the first instance, as labor-intensive and demanding as notebook-denoted performance was, it was also relatively accommodating: notebooks—whether authorized by teacher tick marks, perpetual works-in-progress, or largely empty—located students in the classroom, even if at the back (middle students) or on the fringes (rogues). No mean feat—given, on the one hand, the relative resource-poverty of government school classrooms in Kanchipuram, and on the other, the relative unfamiliarity of the classroom as a formal educational space in a weavers' neighborhood.

Notebooks were especially efficacious when other modes and measures of classroom performance undermined students' being and belonging in the classroom. Middle students, in particular, were often defensive about their examination marks, despite their "automatic promotion" as per RTE rules. Vani, for example, although admitting that she had not received a "rank" on the exam—classroom lingo for failing to secure the conventional passing mark of 35 percent—insisted she was a good student, proffering her notebooks as proof. If Deva was evasive when I asked for his report card, he was quick to remind me of his diligence in copying work in the classroom. By materially affecting (Mulcahy 2012) their participation in the classroom, the notebook economy located students like Vani and Deva as classroom subjects, even when their exam performances threatened otherwise.

Teachers, too, despite their concerns about permissive all pass policies, appreciated the affects and affordances of the notebook economy. Given her students' "background," Mrs. K. frequently cautioned that they lacked "boldness" (confidence) in the classroom: typical classroom expectations, whether in terms of classroom management, teacher interaction, or exam performance, were not "gentle" enough to keep them in school. Presented with my concerns about students constantly chattering in the classroom, she had argued, "If we keep saying 'discipline, discipline,' they will only hate the classroom and drop out." The assistant headmaster had a similar response to the boys seeking to "escape" the classroom: "You can't expect them all to be geniuses; you have to cut them some slack."

If the notebook economy materially affected students' belonging in the classroom, irrespective of their "boldness" or "genius," then, in the second instance, the imperative for material production was deeply familiar to children

from weaving households. Enculturated in the material modalities of the looms, notebook production was intelligible—was tangible—to students in 8-A in a way that the immateriality of (marks-determined) academic performance was not. In the piece-rated and silk-weighted measures of performance on the loom, line counts mattered: as a master weaver I worked with was wont to say, it was "pick by pick, strand by strand, line by line" that the weaver materialized *kanjeevaram* sari. When Kala had shown me her notebook—"See how many lines I have written; see, line by line"—it was an echo of this material idiom of the loom that I had heard.

In sum, the notebook economy materially affected and effected belonging in the classroom. The key performance in 8-A was the performance of the classroom itself in the form of the notebook economy, as a pragmatic accommodation of students' present social-educational circumstances and learning-while-earning histories.

Classrooms as Contiguous with SEZs

As materially affective and effective as the notebook economy was (in terms of classroom performance) for students from weaving households, its modalities failed in the ninth- and tenth-grade classrooms of high school, where the RTE Act no longer applied and school examinations were consequential.[20] For students from classrooms like 8-A, therefore, high school was a typically short-lived affair as they dropped out or flunked out, heading for SEZs instead.

Launched in 2006, SEZs offered foreign investment–friendly tax and labor regimes that had attracted hundreds of multinational car, cellphone, and shoe companies to the vicinity of Kanchipuram. SEZs also attracted a youthful contract workforce of thousands—including those from weavers' neighborhoods, recently displaced from looms into schools. For these youths, often from classrooms similar to those at the lead school, it was their eighth-grade school certificates that were passports to SEZs, serving as proof that they were old enough and schooled enough for assembly-line work.

The material effects of the notebook economy notwithstanding, it was the material efficacy of such classrooms in securing SEZ jobs that legitimated and validated their performance modality. Indeed, for students, parents, and teachers at the lead school, classrooms were perceived as largely contiguous with SEZs—as "holding places" for students, as the assistant headmaster put it, till they entered SEZ spaces. Her students, Mrs. K. had noted approvingly, moved "neatly" from looms to classrooms to SEZs—just like an assembly line. It was SEZ work that materialized their classroom performance as successful—if not on exams, then as "success stories" worthy of documentation.

[20] The "eliminative" public board exam in tenth grade, in particular, marks the end of high school—and often, for students who "fail," the end of their formal education.

Conclusion

First, as 8-A exemplifies, classrooms are complex, layered, and historied social worlds that defy categorial, atomistic, or acontextual descriptions and explanations of classroom processes and outcomes.[21] The "classroom turn" in global educational development is a welcome one, therefore: an opportunity to open the "black box" and reveal—perhaps, even revel in—the complexity of classrooms. Couched in the standards-based reformist and reductionist rhetoric of a "global learning crisis," however, this "classroom turn" risks fundamentally misjudging the messily productive interactions—the "hidden curriculum of social relations and emotionality" (Erickson 2010, 323)—that constitute classrooms as learning spaces.

Second, learning crisis discourses erase the material and affective labor that students and teachers perform to sustain classrooms as ongoing social worlds—in marginalized schooling contexts, in particular. The notebook economy was demanding—but also accommodating of students' socio-educational capacities and cultures, affecting/effecting their belonging in a relatively unfamiliar schooling system that valorized particular forms of (academic) learning. Viewed through the deficit lens of a global learning crisis, however, such accommodating—and inventive, even inclusive—classroom performances were misrecognized as localized failures of teaching/learning.

If the classroom produced in the notebook economy appeared to the global gaze of GMRs as learning-deficient, it was nevertheless locally meaningful to students and parents as materially and culturally relevant productive learning: not only sensible in the familiar material idiom of learning on Kanchipuram's looms but also translated as success [stories] in an increasingly SEZ-based economy. As Sarangapani's (2003) seminal ethnographic account of schooling in an Indian village demonstrated, what counts as appropriate classroom learning is shaped by local ideologies, by local articulations of the roles and purposes of formal education in children's lives. There is no one global culture of schooling/learning, to echo Anderson-Levitt (2003). Global learning crisis narratives, however, in presuming/imposing global definitions of "learning" across classrooms and cultures, effectively reinforce colonial—even racial (Sriprakash et al. 2019)—hierarchies of power and knowledge (Silova 2018) that marginalize "other"/non-Western forms of knowledge (Escobar 1995).

Of course, students and teachers in 8-A realized that notebook-denoted performances did not translate into examination performances. The majority of students—even in this best-performing classroom—were not "original pass," as the assistant headmaster had admitted, but promoted by "grace

[21] Research on classrooms and classroom processes in the last 2 decades has taken to describing them as contingent, emergent, adaptive, dynamic, and nonlinear, emphasizing their complexity (see Turvey 2012).

marks" and "all pass" RTE norms. When a large percentage of India's schoolchildren are similarly precariously situated in formal education—and given the diverse marginalities experienced in schooling contexts in India—perhaps it is not classrooms that need scrutiny, but standardized global definitions of "learning" that disrespect and exclude students' pluriform sociocultural backgrounds (see Tiwary et al. 2023)?

Finally, the notebook economy was not only a material-cultural accommodation of students from Kanchipuram's weavers' neighborhoods but also a pragmatic response to the chronic resource-poverty of the public schooling system in India. When educational planners in the country—influenced by World Bank Education Strategies (Verger and Bonal 2012)—continued to "fix access first," their funding priorities "unfathomably" delinking students' access to classrooms from their learning (Ramachandran 2018, 19), then bare educational classrooms like 8-A were only to be expected. Systematically underfunded and socially "vacated" as a learning space, 8-A was also an increasingly interrupted space, its insufficient teacher resources stretched even thinner by a growing number of "official duties." Given such resource scarcity, the notebook economy and its copying modalities emerged as a coping mechanism that rendered the bare educational classroom habitable—a rational response, co-constructed by students and teachers, to the unfathomable policy decisions of national and international actors. "Global learning crisis" narratives, however, let national and international development actors and strategies off the hook—even as they put teachers and students under the scanner, further marginalizing them by misrecognizing their coping strategies as teaching/learning failures.

The study of classrooms is nothing less than "anthropology writ large," resisting the narrow concerns of educational research (McDermott and Raley 2011, 35). The "classroom turn" as it currently stands, however, is a misdirection, its focus on "[classroom] proximate determinants" of learning (World Bank 2018, 78) only serving to isolate classrooms from the broader structural conditions that produce them. Indeed, the notebook economy did not represent a (learning) crisis in the classroom as much as it signposted multiple sociopolitical crises: on the one hand, economic development models characterized by the growth of "education unintensive" jobs (Mehta et al. 2007), and on the other, public education systems characterized by the false economy of prioritizing either quantity or quality or equality, but never at the same time (Naik 1979). "It's not a learning crisis, it's an international development crisis!" as Silova (2018) declared.

Sriprakash et al. (2019) agree that global learning crisis narratives obfuscate: attempts to make the learning crisis visible typically erase or bracket off its antecedents in deeply unequal economic and educational development at national and global scales. When taken up uncritically in the field of international development education, such narratives, they further argue, may

entrench, even rationalize, the capitalist and racial projects underlying unequal development. The very language of a learning crisis authorizes particular rescues and saviors: typically, Western "experts" who reinscribe Western "best practices" as solutions (Silova 2018) and, in the process, reinforce patterns of racial (dis)advantage and global inequality (Pierre 2020) and produce contempt for "other" locally/culturally relevant and recognized educational performances. When Kanchipuram is reframed in learning crisis narratives as a primarily educationally deficit space, not only are the indigenous learning-and-earning modalities of its historied handlooms rendered educationally unacceptable but also SEZ-based contract work is rendered an unquestioned and acceptable (even successful) trajectory for middle students in lead school classrooms.

Positionality Statement

A questionably "native anthropologist" (Narayan 1993), my work seeks to bear ethnographic witness to the challenging-yet-inventive lives and logics of children and communities responding to global educational projects. The local idiom of my writing, although in necessary dialogue with the global, acknowledges and grapples with the incompleteness/messiness of the translation.

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