



‘The policy is great, but ...’: frontline actor responses to foundational learning reforms

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ABSTRACT

Despite recent initiatives to boost foundational learning in low- and middle-income countries, doubts persist about their uptake. Dominant narratives and research assume that resistance to such reforms stems from frontline actors being either unaware of low learning or apathetic towards the problem. Drawing on interviews with 63 teachers, principals, and bureaucrats in India, this study complicates both assumptions. Most actors were aware of and motivated to address the problem of low foundational learning yet remained doubtful that current reforms would improve outcomes. Their scepticism stemmed from frame dissonance – policies attributed low learning to instructional shortcomings, whereas actors located the problem in broader, interconnected conditions. This mismatch of problem framing subsequently weakens policy resonance and curtails uptake. The study reframes policy implementation not as a matter of frontline compliance but of congruence with frontline sensemaking, underscoring the need for more participatory reform design in education.

KEYWORDS

Foundational learning; Education policy; Policy implementation; Frontline actors; Low- and middle-income countries; India

关键词

基础学习；教育政策；政策实施；一线行动者；中低收入国家；印度

“政策很好，但是.....”：一线行动者对基础学习改革的回应

近年来为提升中低收入国家的基础学习水平推出了诸多改革举措，但人们对这些改革能否真正落地仍存疑虑。主流叙事和相关研究认为，对此类改革的抵触源于一线行动者要么未能意识到学习水平低下的问题，要么对这一问题漠不关心。基于对印度63名教师、校长和教育行政人员的访谈，本研究针对上述两种假设提出更为复杂的解释。研究发现，大多数行动者不仅清楚认识到基础学习水平偏低的问题，而且具有改善这一问题的积极意愿。然而，他们普遍怀疑当前改革措施能否真正提升学习成效。这种怀疑源于一种‘框架失调’：(colon)政策将学习水平低下归因于教学层面的不足，而一线行动者则认为问题根植于更广泛且相互关联的环境之中。问题界定框架之间的这种错位削弱了政策与一线行动者之间的共鸣，进而限制了政策的落地成效。因此，本研究提出新的框架，认为政策实施与一线行动者是否服从无关，而与他们的意义建构有关。研究进一步强调，教育改革应采用更加参与式的政策设计。

Introduction

Recent reports suggest that millions of children in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) are not sufficiently learning, despite being enrolled in schools (e.g. World Bank 2022). Concerns about this *global learning crisis* have mobilised international organisations and donors to prioritise foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) (Beeharry 2021; Evans and Hares 2021). With support from these entities, many LMICs have recently launched policy initiatives to solve their learning crises and improve children's FLN. For instance, India – the context of this paper – launched the NIPUN Bharat mission in 2021 with a goal of achieving universal FLN by 2027. Besides systems for monitoring data and accountability, such policy efforts often include the scaling up of evidence-based instructional interventions.

Despite continued support for FLN reforms, we know little about their uptake among frontline policy actors in education systems. These actors – street-level bureaucrats like teachers and principals, as well as middle-tier bureaucrats like district or regional officials – are often tasked with implementing policies in the last mile (Asim et al. 2023; Lipsky 1980; Mangla 2022). How they respond to reforms – their reactions and sensemaking – shapes how they implement them (Spillane 2000). Reforms to improve learning in LMICs often don't *stick* or resonate deeply with these actors, and subsequently, do not get implemented as envisioned (Schweisfurth and Elliott 2019). Examining why they don't stick is, thus, crucial and requires engaging with actors' responses to such policies. Drawing upon semi-structured interviews with 63 frontline actors in India, this paper examines: *How do frontline policy actors respond to foundational learning policies?*

Studies suggest that the uptake of foundational learning reforms among stakeholders in LMICs is often impeded by either a lack of awareness about low learning (Crawford et al. 2025; Djaker, Ganimian, and Sabarwal 2024) or bureaucratic apathy (Aiyar, Dongre, and Davis 2015; Mangla 2022). However, I find that despite being both aware of low learning and motivated, most frontline actors were still sceptical about policy impact. I explain that this is due to *frame dissonance* (Benford and Snow 2000; Snow et al. 1986) or a mismatch in problem diagnoses between actors and policies. FLN reforms tend to imply poor teaching as the reason for low learning, whereas actors attribute the problem to larger, systemic reasons. This dissonance makes actors less confident about the reform's ability to effect change.

The purpose of this paper is not to authenticate any of these diagnoses over others, but to highlight that their mismatch is detrimental to policy uptake. Amid the recent emphasis on implementation research in global education, studies have continued to focus on the role of actors and stakeholders, while taking policies or programmes as givens. Through this study, I underscore the need to broaden an analytic focus from merely examining how policy actors implement or don't implement reforms, to also considering how reforms resonate or don't resonate with policy actors. In doing so, this paper emphasises the need for greater structured democratic voice (Smith and Benavot 2019) and backward mapping (Elmore 1980) within ongoing FLN initiatives.

Literature review

Following improvements in access, the shift towards quality in global education amplified the understanding that despite being enrolled in school, many children in LMICs were not learning even the basics of reading and mathematics (Pritchett 2013). Over the last

decade, this narrative of a global learning crisis has mobilised global stakeholders towards improving children's foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN). FLN – loosely understood as the ability to read basic texts or perform simple arithmetic calculations – are now commonly-used indicators of education quality, due to their simplicity, measurability, and actionability (Beeharry 2021; Evans and Hares 2021).

The dominant framing of a learning crisis identifies several causes for it. One often-cited reason is the prevalence of *overambitious curricula* – where the pace and rigour of the curriculum taught doesn't align with what students need (Pritchett and Beatty 2012). Other reasons include poor early childhood care, lack of sufficient inputs, poor school leadership, and deficits in teacher skills and motivation (World Bank 2018). However, with inputs-based interventions being increasingly seen as less effective in improving learning (e.g. Kremer, Brannen, and Glennerster 2013), FLN *solutions* today mainly include instructional interventions, such as *Teaching at the Right Level* (TaRL) and structured pedagogy (Angrist et al. 2020). Parallely, recommendations to support these interventions include a systemic commitment towards FLN, frequent measurement of learning outcomes, and data-driven accountability (Crouch 2020; Pritchett, Newman, and Silberstein 2022). These instructional and administrative interventions form the core of most recent FLN reforms in LMICs.

However, the learning crisis narrative and its subsequent prioritisation of FLN remain contested. Scholars critically argue that its technoscientific framing overlooks systemic constraints on educational quality and obscures the racial and colonial roots of learning inequities (Benavot and Smith 2020; Clarke 2022; Sriprakash, Tikly, and Walker 2020). Others contend that it reduces learning to narrow measurable indicators, advances a human capital agenda in education, and legitimises greater influence of non-state actors over public education systems (Ghosh and Sarkar 2025; Languille 2014; Schweisfurth 2023). Despite these critiques, the learning crisis-FLN agenda continues to gain traction, with growing success in shaping policy priorities in LMICs.

In light of such FLN reforms worldwide, concerns about their uptake have led to calls for more implementation research. One commonly cited barrier to stakeholder action in LMICs is *a lack of awareness* about low learning levels. Scholars have advocated for frequent assessments to disseminate data and raise visibility about 'the right problem' of learning stagnation (Pritchett, Banerji, and Kenny 2013, 12). Amid the growing global FLN agenda, studies have tried to understand whether actors in LMICs align with the same. Surveys find that national-level policymakers tend to underestimate the extent of low foundational learning, making them prioritise other aspects of schooling, like vocation or socialisation, instead (Crawford et al. 2025). While doing so, they tend to attribute low learning to poverty and implementation constraints (Yarrow et al. 2024). At a school-level, studies reveal gaps between teachers' estimation of student performance and actual test scores (Djaker, Ganimian, and Sabarwal 2024; Wadmara et al. 2022), which weaken the imperative for instructional changes. These findings suggest that FLN or FLN reforms don't get prioritised as actors simply *do not know* about the severity of the problem.

A second explanation given for the lack of reform uptake is *apathy* among actors. As education policies are eventually implemented by teachers, principals, and bureaucrats, their investment and motivation are crucial for effective delivery. However, studies show this is rarely the case. For instance, in India, such frontline actors often see themselves as powerless cogs in a larger system that emphasises rule compliance through

punitive top-down monitoring (Aiyar and Bhattacharya 2016; Dyer 1999). Their perspectives emerge from and in turn reinforce an apathetic and legalistic bureaucratic culture (Mangla 2022), which results in actors neither showing enthusiasm towards FLN reforms that require changes in practice, nor effectively adopting them (e.g. Aiyar, Dongre, and Davis 2015).

A lack of awareness about learning deficits and a lack of motivation to address them are both plausible barriers to reform uptake. However, both these explanations situate the problem at the individual level of actors – in terms of gaps in their own knowledge or dispositions. In doing so, they scrutinise actors, while taking policies as a given (Cohen 1990; Spillane 2000). Thus, these explanations do not adequately study actor perspectives in relation to reforms themselves. An alternative analytic approach based on actors' sensemaking (see Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer 2002) would explore how they make sense of the specific intent or guidelines of a learning reform. Aligned with this lens, this study suggests a third explanation for the lack of reform uptake – *frame dissonance*.

Conceptual framework

This study draws on the concepts of *problem definitions* and *frames*. Policymaking is often shaped by *policy paradigms* which inform the goals, problems, and tools for reform (Hall 1993). During the agenda-setting for a policy, these paradigms influence how policy problems are framed (Kingdon 1984). Defining a policy problem is an act of categorisation which shapes meanings, solutions, actor roles, and public perceptions (Edelman 1978; Weiss 1989). Given these implications, *problem definition* is a key unit of analysis for studying policies; it includes 'a package of ideas' about the 'causes and consequences' as well as 'a theory about how a problem may be alleviated' (Weiss 1989, 97). Reforms are typically contested over which problem definition should become the dominant narrative shaping policy solutions (e.g. Mehta 2013).

Problem definitions correspond to diagnostic frames within broader policy *frames*. Goffman (1974) defines frames as schemata of interpretation that help individuals to make sense of events and social realities. In social movements and mobilisation, consensus and action around a problem situation are constructed through three core framing tasks: *motivational framing*, which entails a call to action, providing the rationale for solving the problem; *diagnostic framing*, which involves the identification of the source of the problem; and *prognostic framing*, which emerges from diagnostic framing and proposes solutions to the problem (Snow and Benford 1988).

Within policy formulation, frames get codified by policymakers as calls to action, problem statements, and recommended solutions (e.g. Coburn 2006; Woulfin and Gabriel 2022). However, during implementation, frontline actors make sense of and negotiate reforms through their own motivational (why should the problem be solved), diagnostic (why it exists) and prognostic (how to solve it) frames. Alignment of these frames or *frame resonance* facilitates participation and coherence between stakeholders (Snow et al. 1986). Alternatively, *frame dissonance* or misalignment between the policy and actors' interpretive orientations creates policy contestations, as actors advance their own counterframes (Benford and Snow 2000; Weiss 1989) – resulting in tensions and negotiations over policy during enactment.

Recent studies have applied framing theory to education policies in the U.S. and Europe (Luimes 2023; Woulfin and Gabriel 2022). However, in LMICs, especially amid the global FLN agenda, the framing of a learning crisis and its solutions remain under-analysed (Ghosh and Sarkar 2025). Viewing this crisis narrative as a strategic framing to mobilise systemic action, this paper employs frame resonance and dissonance to analyse how actors respond to FLN reforms.

Contextual background

Contrary to popular belief, the current focus on improving learning outcomes in India isn't unprecedented. Earlier reforms in elementary education prioritised schooling quality (MoHRD 1986), with several government and independent reports discussing reasons for low learning (for e.g. Yashpal Committee in 1993, PROBE report in 1998, etc.). These included poor infrastructure, limited child-centred learning, low teacher capacity, and incoherent syllabi and textbooks (e.g. MoHRD 1993) – which subsequently became key focus areas for a range of initiatives during the 1990s like the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP), Operation Blackboard, and Minimum Levels of Learning. However, these reforms yielded limited gains in learning. Evidence suggests that their impact was constrained by weak bureaucratic capacity, inconsistent communication of policy expectations, and limited ownership among key implementing actors (Dyer 1999; 2000).

India's most recent National Education Policy (NEP) in 2020 recognised a 'learning crisis' and made the universal attainment of FLN an 'urgent national mission' (MoHRD 2020, 8). This crisis was attributed to low-quality early childhood care, overambitious curricula, weak teacher capacity, malnutrition, and language barriers in schools (MoHRD 2018). While the NEP's proposals reflected this multi-faceted diagnosis (MoHRD 2020), the subsequent FLN-focused NIPUN Bharat mission in 2021 narrowed the focus to four areas: enrolment and retention, teacher capacity, child-centred teaching and learning materials (TLMs), and frequent monitoring of learning outcomes (DoSEL 2021). Strikingly, over 90% of the mission's budget was allocated for developing TLMs (Sharma and Chauhan 2023), suggesting its narrower focus on instructional improvements to improve learning outcomes.

This study examines the FLN policy contexts of three states – Haryana, Jharkhand, and Delhi. The national-level NIPUN mission informed the policies of Haryana and Jharkhand, which emphasised structured pedagogy, activity-based learning, monitoring, and the distribution of FLN workbooks, teacher guides, and TLMs. In Delhi, *Mission Buniyaad* was a state initiative running since 2018 to boost FLN outcomes. It centred on the TaRL approach, with teacher training and instructional resources provided on differentiated teaching. Despite variations in the design of the FLN reforms in these three states, their policy narratives similarly emphasised a crisis of foundational learning. Additionally, they prioritised some form of instructional change as a strategy to solve this crisis. As such, their framing of the problem and the solution was broadly similar.

Methods

This study emerges from a larger project examining the implementation of FLN policies in India. The project was driven by an anthropological approach to studying policy

(Levinson, Margaret Sutton, and Winstead 2009), which focused the inquiry on analysing policy formulation and implementation as sociocultural processes, wherein actors *appropriate* policies – or selectively decide what aspects to implement. I didn't explore policy implementation as a linear, top-down process, but investigated decision-making at each policy level. Making sense of these decisions required first understanding how actors perceived and responded to FLN reforms.

Sites and sample

I analysed frontline responses to FLN policies in three states: Delhi, a predominantly urban system where a TaRL-centred FLN mission predated the national FLN focus; Haryana, a largely rural state lauded for its recent gains in FLN outcomes under its NIPUN mission; and Jharkhand, a rural state with historically low learning outcomes and under-resourced schools, where the state's FLN mission faced administrative challenges. I selected these states for two reasons. First, their FLN reforms had been launched at different times, providing variations in durations of policy engagement among actors. Second, their diverse systems, structures, and resources maximised contextual variation. My intention was not cross-state comparison, but to trace thematic recurrences across varied contexts.

In each state, I randomly selected a district and 4–5 schools there for preliminary visits. Based on informal conversations and observations, I identified one focal school per state where I noticed strong rhetorical support for the policy but irregular implementation. All primary teachers and principals in these focal schools were included in the sample. To mitigate idiosyncrasies, I later interviewed actors in non-focal schools too, guided by emerging themes from the focal school data. Further, school actors identified key middle-tier bureaucrats (cluster- and block-level administrators, mentor teachers, trainers, etc.) who influenced policy implementation. I subsequently recruited these bureaucrats via snowball sampling. Overall, my participant sample included 63 frontline actors: 38 teachers and principals and 25 bureaucrats.

Data collection and analysis

Given my focus on actor responses to policies, interviews were the primary data source, conducted in-person between 2022–2024, with IRB approval and signed consent. All interviews were semi-structured, conducted in Hindi, and lasted 30–90 min. Questions explored actors' roles, their successes and challenges, interpretations of FLN reforms, and experiences with implementation. Interview transcripts were analysed using the Atlas.ti qualitative research software. To strategically manage the analysis of such a large dataset, I used index coding (Deterding and Waters 2021) to segment transcripts into chunks, labelled according to their broader conversational topic (e.g. 'role description', 'policy understanding'). My analysis of the relevant segments of this data combined deductive and inductive coding, i.e. I started with a codebook based on my research questions, hypotheses, and literature review, and then subsequently expanded it using emerging themes from the data itself. Following Saldaña (2009), I refined index codes into smaller codes, grouped them in thematic categories (e.g. 'description of learning levels', 'motivation for policy', etc.), and then synthesised them through analytic memos. In the final analytic stage, I mapped these memos onto motivational, diagnostic,

and prognostic frames. I also identified negative cases or outliers within the emerging findings and incorporated them into my synthesis. To ensure data validity, I conducted member checks with over one-third of my participants across all three states.

Positionality

As a former teacher in India and a current researcher at an elite foreign university, I navigated both insider and outsider positions during data collection. My insider status helped participants relate more easily and share thoughts candidly with me. On the other hand, my outsider status sometimes elicited guarded responses, conservative expressions, and performativity. Navigating between these positions required me to build trustworthy relationships, often through supporting participants in their daily work (e.g. teaching substitute lessons, assisting administrative tasks). At the same time, within a patriarchal and caste-stratified society in India, my identity as a privileged caste, Hindi-speaking male enabled my access to several sites and made some participants more open to sharing.

Findings

My analysis shows that frontline actors recognised low learning levels as a significant problem, which complemented their enthusiasm for the goals sought by FLN policies. However, they had distinct problem diagnoses than what the policy signalled – which sparked their doubts about its ability to improve learning outcomes.

Problem awareness

I found that not only were most frontline actors aware that many children in their contexts could not read simple texts or do basic arithmetic, but they also viewed it as a matter of grave concern. Roughly 70% of my participants, equivalently across the three states, brought up the issue of low learning levels while describing the challenges of their professional contexts. Many of them described this problem with a sense of worry and frustration.

A child in 3rd grade is still below basics ... Like that day in my grade 3 class, a girl couldn't spell C-O-W. Can you believe that? A grade 3 girl and she can't even spell "cow". That really hit me hard! (Teacher, Delhi)

Evident in comments like these was an affective reckoning with the state of low learning as a *hard-hitting* situation, which I observed among several actors. Teachers specifically expressed deeper concerns – describing how the severity of low learning affected their day-to-day efforts in the classroom. At the same time, even non-school actors were aware of the state of foundational learning based on their assessment of learning data or school observations.

The first school that I visited in my role ... I came back very frustrated. There were children who had no clue about the alphabet, and we were supposed to get them to read textbooks. Imagine, the teacher is writing something on the board, and these kids can't even copy that down. (District official, Jharkhand)

Here too, the official expresses an affective response at having seen the inability of children to identify alphabets. What stood out across comments like these was that, despite similarities in awareness, actors had varying conceptions of what *foundational* or *basic* was in relation to learning. While skills like copying content from the board were not part of what policies defined as foundational learning, actors saw them as the least students should be able to do, and thus, expressed their worries in relation to them.

Many actors intuitively described the problem of low learning in terms of quantitative estimates. I understood this as a common discursive practice for communicating social crises, ‘when statistics are intensely mobilized to express the gravity of the situation’ (Desrosières 2010). For instance, a principal from Jharkhand estimated that ‘if we have 100 children, five of them will be above average. 15 of them will be near average. And 80% of them are actually below average level’. Similarly, a cluster-level official in Haryana felt that while being ‘successful with 70% of the children’, they were struggling to help ‘the other 30%’. While it was beyond this study’s scope to verify these estimates using reliable data from the respective contexts, what this underlines is that frontline actors didn’t shy away from acknowledging low learning levels in their contexts. For the purposes of this study, I consider this acknowledgment and the accompanying affective response as a reflection of problem awareness, irrespective of its quantitative accuracy. Plausible explanations for this heightened awareness among frontline actors may include both individual as well as systemic factors. For example, actors may have become more aware only after recent policy recognition or extensive media publicity of learning crisis narratives. Alternatively, these actors may have already been aware of low learning levels but were now more comfortable in openly acknowledging them after the state’s recognition of a learning crisis.

Policy praise

The above problem awareness was complemented by an overall appreciation among frontline actors for recent policy efforts; they singled out the goals of their state’s FLN reforms for praise. A Jharkhand teacher, for example, recognised that ‘NIPUN is trying to get kids to be literate and at their grade levels by 2027’, which they felt was a ‘necessary push for the system’ and thus, had ‘no problem agreeing with’. For many, the launch of FLN missions signalled political will from the government to improve learning, which according to them, had been historically absent.

Actors felt that their state’s prioritisation of FLN had already started shifting prior gaps in awareness. A teacher coach believed that Delhi’s FLN mission had made learning gaps more visible.

Many children who were neglected, who were behind in academics, were never recognized before. Now with this [initiative], every teacher has a list which says which children are proficient and who are not. That’s the best thing which happened due to this mission.

Here, the coach appreciates one of the core policy guidelines – the monitoring of learning outcomes. She perceives it as a contributor to greater equity within learning, thereby aligning with the policy’s own framing as an effort to boost the learning of those *left behind*. Others highlighted that the timing of these FLN reforms right after extended school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic was particularly vital; they believed that

such a targeted focus would help children catch up quickly with the learning they *lost*. Such alignments with the policy's goals reflect a resonance of *motivational frames*, or a support for the motivation behind FLN reforms and their call to action.

I noted that the praise for reforms across the three states was closely related to their goals, and not necessarily their mechanisms. Given the broad nature of the goals that the reforms aimed for, actors were able to connect them to what they valued. For example, a block official in Haryana remarked: 'I like FLN [policy] because the focus is on reading and writing. I have seen that children struggle to read or write even in Grade 8. How will these children take tests, if they cannot even read?' Here the official's support for the policy emerged from their belief that its focus on reading and writing would help children perform better in tests. Their appreciation was not tied to how children would be taught reading, but to a larger outcome reading would enable. In similar cases, actors connected FLN reforms to enabling children to 'complete textbooks', 'understand classroom instructions', or 'work harder in schools' – outcomes that were not the explicit goals of the policies, but were construed as connected to them. Thus, the alignment in *motivational frames* was to some extent driven by the broad framing of the policy goals – which enabled actors to link the reforms to what they valued as important in education.

Problem diagnosis

When probed about the reasons for low learning levels, frontline actors pointed to multiple interrelated factors rather than any single cause. These descriptions reflected their *diagnostic frames*; categorising participant responses showed a range of perceived barriers to children's foundational learning (Figure 1).

Many actors, especially almost two-thirds of teachers and principals, linked low learning to limited parental support. While in Delhi, many expected parents to support children with learning at home, in Haryana and Jharkhand, where rates of parental illiteracy were higher, they were expected to at least ensure their children's regular attendance. A Delhi principal asserted that

Teachers can do what they do only when there is some support from the other side, no? We keep calling parents, asking them to send their children to school. When we show parents their children's learning levels, that they are struggling, there is absolutely zero reaction from them. What can we do for such kids?

Quotes like this reflect animosities towards parents; many felt that given children spent more hours per day at home than in school, parents had to be held accountable for their learning too. The lack of parental investment was frequently linked with low student attendance – another perceived reason for low learning. A Haryana teacher emphasised that 'no matter what the situation is, if a child is regular to school, they will learn', implying that the usual programming of schools was sufficient for children to master foundational skills, as long as they showed up. Other times, blaming parents also brought out deep-seated social biases among individuals. Frontline actors, often from dominant caste and class backgrounds, used deficit social lenses to explain low learning.

The problem is that most of these Bhuiya (a marginalized indigenous community) parents keep drinking all day. As a result, some of these children are the most neglected. And they have some of the lowest learning levels in our school. (Teacher, Jharkhand)

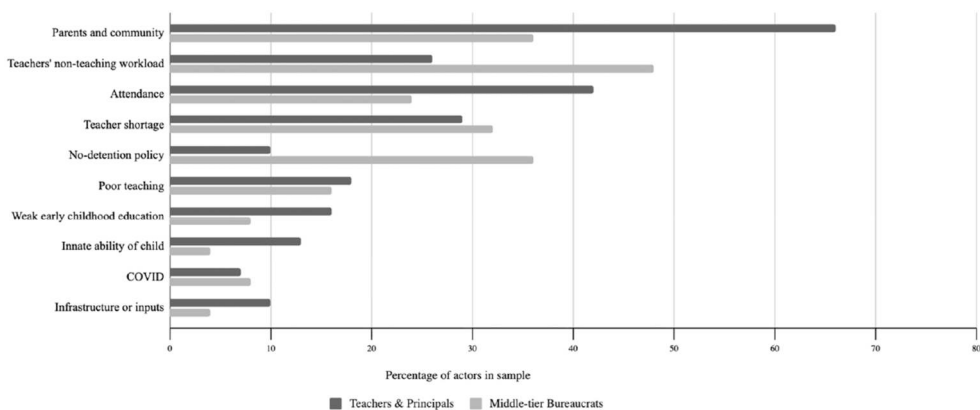


Figure 1. Reasons cited for low learning levels [attached].

Overall, blaming attendance and parental inaction for low learning were accompanied by a subtext that schools were doing their best possible, and thus, any learning gaps had to be due to reasons beyond their control.

Among bureaucrats, a common diagnosis was the heavy administrative and non-teaching workload imposed on teachers. This, they felt, reduced instructional time, which hindered learning.

Why don't children have FLN? Teaching is not an easy task anymore, that's why. No child is born proficient. If they are exposed to regular teaching, they will learn. But if teachers spend their day doing medical work and filling reports, what can they do? (Cluster official, Jharkhand)

Given local bureaucrats were themselves burdened by legalistic administrative duties (Aiyar and Bhattacharya 2016), such comments demonstrate solidarity and empathy between frontline actors at various levels. This also challenges the conventional logic that hierarchies within education systems enable blame to be handed down the levels (Kwok 2024). Instead, these findings suggest that non-school actors were often confident about teachers' capacities to equip children with foundational learning.

Relatedly, middle-tier bureaucrats identified teacher shortages as a major barrier to learning; they felt constrained between the pressures of state expectations to improve learning and the challenges of inadequate personnel. In Haryana and Jharkhand, this was a persistent issue: in 2025, about 15% of sanctioned teaching posts in Haryana were vacant, while nearly a third of schools in Jharkhand were run by a single teacher. Such conditions fuelled frustrations among actors as well as an underlying belief that adequate staffing would be enough to solve learning gaps. For instance, a district official in Haryana was convinced that 'there is only one solution. If there is a teacher, learning will happen ... whichever schools have sufficient teachers, work gets done there. Wherever there is a shortage, there is no learning happening. It is that simple!' Even in Delhi, where schools were relatively better staffed, teachers were often pulled into trainings during school hours, leaving unattended classrooms or bloated teacher-student ratios. As a result, actors felt little to no learning happened on a consistent basis in schools.

While the FLN reforms in these states had prioritised instructional reforms to address a learning crisis, less than 20% of frontline actors felt poor teaching was the reason why learning was low. Some teachers introspectively acknowledged that they ‘also had to take the blame’, while some bureaucrats felt that teachers had been using ‘old methods’ or ‘not been productive with their instructional time’. These actors acknowledged that improving learning would require considerable upskilling of teachers and teaching, alongside other systemic and logistical fixes. Yet almost no actor identified teachers or teaching as the singular reason for low learning across my sample, reflecting a wider range of diagnostic frames among policy actors compared to what the respective policies were acting upon. This mismatch, as I show next, had consequences for actors’ conviction in the reforms.

Dissonance and doubt

Despite a motivational alignment with FLN reforms, actors’ problem diagnoses complicated their views. Frontline actors rarely read actual policy texts; they often interpret policies through immediately-visible *policy signals* as well as messages within their social networks (Coburn 2001; Spillane 2000). These visible policy signals communicate to actors what the policy is about and trying to do, and thus, play a significant role in shaping their engagement with it (Dyer 2000). Besides clearly-stated learning goals, the policy signals for FLN reforms in the three states primarily entailed instructional interventions – such as the distribution of teacher handbooks and TLMs, trainings for TaRL, etc. As such, these reforms implicitly suggested a diagnosis of low foundational learning around limitations in teaching, which they sought to improve. However, frontline actors had different diagnoses and prognoses for low learning, which resulted in *frame dissonance*.

This dissonance resulted in frontline actors expressing a nuanced response to FLN reforms in their context. For example, referring to the non-teaching burdens of teachers, a Jharkhand official reflected that ‘the policy is great, the textbooks are fantastic. But if teachers don’t get to teach, results will continue being like this’. Here, the actor didn’t discount the policy but seemed unconvinced about its impact if teachers’ instructional time was not maximised. Another actor, whose problem diagnosis included parental apathy, said that the policy ‘made a lot of sense’, but ‘until parents are active, these problems will keep happening’. These responses reveal a complex perception of FLN reforms among frontline actors – an agreement with the overall intent of the policy was accompanied by a pessimism about its ability to actually improve learning. In other words, they paradoxically expressed both praise and doubt for these policies – which challenges conventional dichotomies of reforms being either supported or rejected by actors.

These responses, I argue, stem from an alignment of the motivational frames between policies and actors, but dissonance of diagnostic and prognostic frames.

FLN is important, no doubt! So why don’t they give us special personnel for it? So much money is being spent on these FLN materials, workbooks; why not spend it on hiring? We have distributed everything, but there is barely anyone to teach them. Till there is sufficient manpower, nothing will happen. (Principal, Jharkhand)

This stance demonstrates that his understanding of a policy’s prognostic frame is based on the policy signals immediately visible to him – the distribution of materials and

workbooks. Yet his own prognosis about the need for more personnel made him perceive the reform as an unnecessary expenditure of money that didn't address the real problem according to him. This brought about a considerable loss of faith in the policy's potential impact ('nothing will happen'), despite a belief in the value of prioritising FLN.

A sense of actors' diagnoses not being addressed by FLN reforms translated into reservations about them. Given the state's continued failure to address what they saw as barriers to learning, actors became increasingly disillusioned with not just current FLN policies, but learning reforms in general.

In our district, we have over a 100 schools with just one teacher. Amid all this, you bring whatever policy to improve learning, NIPUN or whatever, it won't yield a proper result. Do as much training; provide as many materials; but how will kids become proficient in FLN if this is the situation? (District official, Haryana)

Similarly, a Delhi teacher remarked that 'if the student teacher ratio is 25:1 and maintained throughout the year, we will not need Mission Buniyaad at all'. The underlying belief in these quotes that children won't learn no matter what policies were launched or the perception that 'Mission Buniyaad would not even be needed' doesn't imply a sense of apathy towards policy. Instead, it reflects actors' preoccupations with the daily challenges they have to navigate – which they understand as key reasons for low foundational learning. Without them being addressed, actors expressed a lack of faith in FLN reforms – potentially jeopardising their uptake.

In contrast, the handful of actors who identified teaching quality as a reason for low learning, had a greater frame resonance with FLN policies. They found many of the policy's visible signals as beneficial and thus, demonstrated more optimism. A Haryana teacher felt that

FLN is a necessary step. Many of us have flaws. We often tend not to do as much as we should. Now with the awareness that the FLN folks might visit frequently, the teacher will be more alert and work diligently. Whether that translates into outcomes is inconsequential, but they will be prepared and motivated.

These actors acknowledged teaching as in need of improvement and hence were more confident about the introduction of TLMs or classroom monitoring. These cases suggested that a stronger diagnostic frame alignment was associated with a greater conviction in the policy solutions.

Discussion

In this paper, I show that while frontline actors recognise the severity of low learning and broadly agree with the intent of FLN policies, they remain sceptical about their potential impact. This insight challenges assumptions that agreement or disagreement with a policy equates to its acceptance or rejection respectively. Instead, I highlight the possibility of more nuanced responses towards policies that complicate narratives of frontline actors as inherently resistant to or saboteurs of reform. These findings introduce frame dissonance as an additional explanation for limited policy uptake for improving learning, alongside the lack of problem awareness and bureaucratic apathy. As this study demonstrates, actors may be aware of and invested in addressing learning gaps and yet doubt a

reform that attempts to do so. From these findings, I outline four issues for FLN reforms, in India and other LMICs.

First, while resistance to reform is widely seen as a form of institutional negligence or inertia, actors often have their own reasons for not adopting change (O'Sullivan 2002; Tyack and Cuban 1995). In India, it is plausible that given the learning crisis is framed around instructional shortcomings, teachers and principals might feel threatened and deflect the blame to other diagnoses. Yet most factors cited by frontline actors for low learning – such as low attendance, teacher shortages, bureaucratic overload, resource gaps, and deficit views of communities – are longstanding challenges, well documented in the literature on education and public policy in India (e.g. Dasgupta and Kapur 2020; Dyer 1999; Sriprakash 2010). At the same time, this paper doesn't dismiss the inadequacy of teaching quality either, as pedagogies in Indian government schools have historically remained unchanged from their authoritative, disciplinary, and rote- and repetition-centred nature (Brinkmann 2019; Sarangapani 2003; Sriprakash 2009) – contributing to stagnant learning outcomes. Persistently low learning outcomes in India, as in other LMICs, are thus shaped by multi-faceted and intertwined factors; any single cause isn't necessarily more important to *fix* than others. This paper does not adjudicate between policies' or frontline actors' problem diagnoses. Instead, my goal is to highlight the very mismatch in diagnosis as a deeper issue of policy inadequacy – where conflicting theories of change create an implementation impasse. Such dissonance results less from how problems are described in policy texts, than from what reforms signal to actors as the problem and its solution.

Second, the frame dissonance identified in this paper isn't unique to current FLN reforms in India; prior reforms have elicited similar responses. For instance, during the implementation of Operation Blackboard during the 1990s, Dyer (1999) found that for teachers, the only visible policy signal was the distribution of teaching aids. As a result, they overlooked the broader policy goal (improving school facilities to make them child-friendly) and interpreted the reform as about using aids to improve teaching. Frustrated that deeper problems remained unaddressed, they came to doubt the reform's relevance. For instance, a teacher in Dyer's (2000) study commented that

The government doesn't know what our needs are. Parents send a child to school to get grain but at the same time they are not aware of education ... Even if you work for a hundred years it's not going to change: they can make any number of policies, and nothing will change. (145)

Several of the participant responses in this study echo this sentiment, where a lack of faith in policy emerged from its failure to address what actors saw as problems. In her case, Dyer (1999) noted that for most actors, Operation Blackboard seemed 'to have provided a remedy for the wrong ailment' (54). Studies in other LMICs show similar frustrations among stakeholders when new pedagogical, governance, or policy changes are initiated (Kwok 2024; O'Sullivan 2002). This recurring tension raises larger questions about how educational reforms in LMICs get seen by frontline actors, particularly with respect to what problems they purport to solve and how.

Third, echoing studies from other contexts on why learning reforms don't *stick*, I emphasise that actor responses towards policies cannot be reduced to a binary of acceptance or rejection (Cohen 1990; Schweisfurth and Elliott 2019). Understanding how they

engage with reforms requires examining *frame resonance* (Coburn 2006; Snow et al. 1986), which, in this case, refers to a policy's ability to strike a connection with actors to motivate action. In trying to understand why learning reforms do not stick, this lens of resonance flips the spotlight back on the policies themselves, instead of policy actors. In conventional analyses, policies and policy messages are often taken as givens, while policy actors are scrutinised as agents trying to implement, resist, or circumvent them (Spillane 2000). Through this paper, I argue that *what* policies entail or *how* they are framed also influence the extent of their implementation. In other words, instead of merely probing why policy actors do not take up policies, these findings underline the need to also investigate why policies themselves do not get taken up by policy actors.

Lastly, the findings complicate the ongoing proliferation of reforms in LMICs, as part of a shared global commitment to foundational learning in response to a learning crisis. Most such initiatives – like the NIPUN Mission in this study – are centred around evidence-based interventions, understood as *what works* to improve learning in LMICs (Angrist et al. 2020). Yet, as my findings show, scaling them without an inclusive reckoning of *who it works and does not work for* threatens implementation. Efforts to address the learning crisis through symbolic prioritisation of FLN and narrow, instructional fixes are unlikely to succeed if they ignore systemic constraints and bypass meaningful engagement with frontline educators.

Three limitations of this study are important to acknowledge. First, it captures only actors' initial responses towards FLN reforms. While frame dissonance appeared to weaken actors' conviction in policies, whether this translates into circumvention in practice remains beyond the scope of the data here. Second, the analysis emphasised shared themes across the three states rather than a comparative lens, which might have revealed variations shaped by political, cultural, or resource contexts. The common frame dissonance I find across the states might be explained by the similarity of how policies and their problem definitions of a learning crisis were framed, even though their designs differed. Third, while the inclusion of three diverse states strengthened the analytic sample, the findings shouldn't be assumed as generalisable for other Indian states or LMICs, where different policy framings, social contexts, and institutional arrangements may produce distinct dynamics of resonance or dissonance.

Conclusion

Cohen (1990) highlights a *paradox of policy* in education policy implementation: learning reforms often cast teachers as the problem and yet task them with implementing the proposed solutions. Analogously, this study points to a paradox of policy problems: policies addressing low learning are formulated to solve a particular problem, without addressing what frontline actors in charge of implementation see as problems themselves. When actors prioritise different problems to solve in service of their shared goals, a significant incoherence emerges within the education system. Although targeted FLN initiatives like the NIPUN mission create motivational coherence to improve learning, frame dissonance undermines deeper alignment between actors and policy, reducing sustainability over time. This cannot be resolved through top-down imposition of hegemonic problem diagnoses or outcome-based accountability, but requires more participatory policy processes.

One way forward for FLN reforms to have sustainable impact is through what Smith and Benavot (2019) refer to as *structured democratic voice*. Ongoing policy discussions to address the global learning crisis predominantly revolve around strategies like TaRL or structured pedagogy – promoted by influential non-state organisations and evaluated through randomised trials by economists. Missing in these conversations are the perspectives of frontline workers who work with or in schools as implementing agents. By ‘organizing opportunities for diverse education stakeholders to articulate their views when policies are being planned and evaluated’ (Smith and Benavot 2019, 194), contemporary FLN reforms can reimagine accountability, ensure greater policy ownership and implementation fidelity. This would result in more *backward mapping* of policy (Elmore 1980). Forward-mapped policies, much like current FLN policies in India, view schools or systems as blank slates to be imprinted with a new set of changes – crucially overlooking the complex ways in which frontline actors adapt and implement reforms to suit their personal choices. This enables a recurring impasse for policies, where policy elites keep lamenting about frontline actors not transforming their plans into practice, while frontline actors get frustrated with seeing policy elites not addressing what their local contexts need (Tyack and Cuban 1995). In sharp contrast, backward mapping acknowledges adaptation in context, reduces hierarchical control, and enhances uptake by aligning with actors’ realities. It identifies the specific behaviours at the lowest level of the implementation process that need change and backward plans the policy to see what other levels can do to affect that (Elmore 1980). For FLN reforms, this means moving beyond purely instructional solutions to also address the diverse barriers frontline actors identify – such as attendance and administrative burdens – while simultaneously developing their problem awareness, sensitivity, and dispositions. Coordinating these dimensions of alignment can increase the chances of reforms resonating with those responsible for carrying them out.

As more and more LMICs launch their own FLN reforms, this paper underscores the importance of frame resonance – the alignment between how policies and frontline actors diagnose low learning – for their sustainability. Amid existing calls for implementation research, my findings help understand barriers to FLN interventions. Rather than viewing frontline actors as barriers, I highlight that engaging their assumptions and practices is key to empowering them as agents of change. This requires, as I have argued earlier, shifting the focus from what these actors do or not do, to also look at what reforms address or not address.

Future research should examine whether successful implementation of learning reforms corresponds to how they resonate with policy actors. Further, controlled or natural experiments could compare whether settings with purposefully-designed reforms that address a wide range of problem diagnoses show better policy uptake or implementation. At the same time, research should flip the spotlight back on the politics of policy formulation itself: How are policy problems around learning in LMICs framed and prioritised? Whose problem definitions count, whose are excluded, and with what consequences?

Scholarly discussions on learning in LMICs should also be wary to avoid ahistoricity and an amnesia to past reforms in LMICs. Studies from various countries have highlighted the shortcomings of efforts to improve learning through the adoption of instructional changes like learner-centred pedagogies or activity-based learning (Barrett 2007;

Sakata, Bremner, and Cameron 2022; Vavrus 2009). However, the recurring reliance on familiar instructional fixes – new materials, textbooks, or pedagogical trainings – despite past failures raises deeper questions about approaches to improve learning in LMICs. Why do learning reforms repeatedly return to the same solutions? Therefore, instead of only studying where policies break down during implementation, it is equally important to study why policies don't get reimaged during formulation.

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