# Everything, yet nothing:
# Interpretations of foundational literacy and numeracy among frontline actors in India

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**Abstract**

Amid growing concern over a global learning crisis, foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) has become a central policy priority in low- and middle-income countries. Despite its widespread adoption, FLN remains loosely defined, and little is known about how it is understood by actors responsible for implementation. This paper examines how frontline policy actors in India interpret FLN following the launch of a major national policy initiative. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 52 teachers, principals, and middle-tier bureaucrats across two states, alongside observations of their day-to-day activities, policy meetings and trainings, the study applies a policy sensemaking lens to analyze how FLN is defined, interpreted, and discussed in practice. The findings show that ambiguity in global and national policy texts translates into narrow understandings of FLN among frontline actors, centered on reading fluency and procedural arithmetic. Beyond definitions, FLN is predominantly interpreted in form-focused ways, emphasizing activities, materials, and teaching aids rather than pedagogical purpose or subject-specific learning. Consequently, FLN reforms are enacted as an additional set of tasks layered onto existing literacy and numeracy practice rather than as an instructional reorientation. The paper argues that FLN functions as a floating signifier, mobilizing consensus while masking interpretive incoherence, and highlights the importance of attending to frontline sensemaking in learning-focused education reforms in LMICs.

## 1. Introduction

Amid recent claims of a ‘global learning crisis’, major global education stakeholders have prioritized achieving children’s foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) as an urgent goal [1]. Commonly understood as the ability to read simple texts and perform arithmetic calculations, FLN has rapidly become a dominant indicator of education quality and a focal point of reform in many low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). Despite being seen as “concrete and

measurable enough to be both actionable and provide a much-needed metric" for accountability in global education [1, p. 1), FLN is only a recent term in global education discourse that continues to have no clear or consistent definition [2].

Studies of FLN programs or policies often prioritize *what works*, focusing on the impact of interventions on learning outcomes [e.g. 3; 4; 5]. Far less attention has been paid to FLN as a policy idea – specifically, to how different actors understand and interpret the term when it is mobilized in reform agendas. This gap matters for three reasons. First, policy implementation is shaped by interpretation: how actors make sense of policy ideas influences how reforms are enacted [6; 7; 8; 9]. Second, although prioritizing FLN is assumed to produce a coherent systemic focus on learning [10; 11], divergent understandings of what FLN entails may instead generate incoherence. Third, a policy's language plays a central role in how it is promoted or operationalized [12; 13; 7]. While FLN is a relatively new term in global education parlance, it describes competencies long discussed under labels like 'basic reading and math', 'fundamental literacy and numeracy', 'minimum learning levels', etc. We therefore know little about what is gained or lost in interpretation, when a new, ambiguously-defined term like FLN is introduced to organize educational reform.

This paper investigates: *How do frontline policy actors in India understand and interpret FLN as a policy idea?* The Indian government declared attaining universal FLN as an "urgent national priority" [14] and launched one of the world's largest FLN initiatives in 2021 named NIPUN. In the wake of this launch, based on semi-structured interviews with 52 frontline actors across two states and extensive observations of policy meetings and trainings, I investigate how they make sense of FLN. These 'frontline policy actors' include street-level bureaucrats [15] like teachers and principals, as well as middle-tier bureaucrats like regional or district officials [16].

Beyond an analysis of how they define FLN directly, I examine the descriptors, language, and ideas they use to discuss FLN as a policy idea in their daily activities.

I find that the vague conceptualization of FLN in global and national policy texts translates into narrow, procedural notions of literacy and numeracy among frontline actors, rather than substantive ideas. Not only was the term FLN used to denote a variety of perceived changes, but FLN policies[1] were also understood in predominantly form-focused ways, foregrounding activities, materials, and teaching aids rather than shifts in literacy or numeracy instruction. This resulted in FLN becoming an additional *thing to do* on top of existing school activities. By foregrounding frontline interpretations, this study highlights the limits of mobilizing FLN as a policy imperative without attending to how its meanings get constructed in implementation. In doing so, it shows how policymaking around ambiguous catchwords can exacerbate incoherence between reform aspirations and practice in LMICs.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. FLN and the global learning crisis

A growing focus on education quality [17] and the expansion of large-scale assessments in the 2000s [18] revealed that millions of children in LMICs were attending school without acquiring basic skills, giving rise to the discourse of a 'global learning crisis' [e.g. 19]. This crisis spurred an emphasis on foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN), justified by claims that these skills are prerequisites for further learning [2] and drivers of human capital outcomes [20]. Despite concerns about narrowing learning to a narrow set of skills [21], FLN has become the dominant metric of education quality in global education discourse [1].

[1] The term 'FLN policies' is used here onwards in the manuscript to collectively refer to the various guidelines, programs, and strategies under the NIPUN mission in India.

Evidence on FLN-focused instructional interventions, like Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) and structured pedagogy, positions them among the most effective and cost-efficient reforms [3; 4; 5], leading to national-scale adoption across several LMICs. FLN-centered policies have also been associated with other improved schooling outcomes like continued enrolment [22; 23], reinforcing calls for a coherent, system-wide focus on FLN [11]. This advocacy rests on two assumptions. First, FLN represents a *commonsensical* prerequisite for learning despite limited conceptual clarity about what it entails [24]. Most of the discourse around FLN centers its *foundational* component more than its *literacy* and *numeracy* components. Second, FLN is positioned as a simple, universally intelligible indicator that can be readily understood and supported by diverse stakeholders [1].

Yet, these assumptions obscure important gaps. Educational policymaking in LMICs often prioritizes reform design and outcomes over implementation processes [25; 26], leaving a limited understanding of what a focus on FLN looks like in practice. While scholars advocate for 'simple, doable' indicators like FLN instead of trying to do *too much* [23; 27], systemic complexity and variations in actor sensemaking may complicate this agenda. Calls for systemic coherence around FLN [11] overlook the possibility that actors may prioritize FLN while holding divergent understandings of *what* it means, undermining policy implementation. For a rapidly formalized but inconsistently defined policy idea like FLN, it remains unclear whether a policy-level coherent focus on it translates into coherence in practice and stakeholder understanding. This study sheds light on this unexplored dimension.

**2.2. Policy implementation in LMICs**

Scholarship on education policy implementation in LMICs often focus on factors shaping the capacity of policy actors. One strand examines non-school or middle-tier bureaucrats [16], who

provide administrative or instructional support in education systems. Adopting a *behavioral-institutional* lens, this literature emphasizes bureaucrats' dispositions and institutional norms as key determinants of implementation capacity. Studies highlight, for instance, bureaucrats' perceptions of powerlessness within hierarchical systems [28], systemic apathy toward change [29], entrenched cultures of rule-bound compliance [30], and competing priorities within education systems [31; 32].

A second body of scholarship examines how teachers engage with reforms in LMICs. Teachers' capacity to adopt instructional change is constrained by their working conditions, including poor infrastructure, heavy workloads, and tight surveillance [33; 34]. Additionally, they interpret novel teaching reforms through existing cultural beliefs, values, and practices [35; 36]. Research on global reform ideas, like learner-centered pedagogy (LCP), show how these are recontextualized in LMICs [37; 38; 39]. In India, LCP has often conflicted with dominant views of knowledge transmission [40; 41], leading teachers – without adequate support and knowledge – to interpret reforms superficially as calls to 'do activities', rather than as shifts in their underlying beliefs about learning [42; 43].

This study contributes to both literatures by foregrounding interpretation as a central but underexamined dimension of policy implementation in LMICs. Behavioral-institutional research has paid limited attention to how bureaucrats make sense of policy ideas, while studies of teacher sensemaking in LMICs have not examined this dimension specifically within the current global emphasis on FLN. Addressing these gaps, this study examines how teachers, principals, and middle-tier bureaucrats interpret FLN as a policy idea. By focusing on sensemaking, it demonstrates how global policy catchwords translate unevenly into practice in LMICs and

challenges assumptions that FLN functions as a simple, universally-understood indicator capable of driving educational quality.

## 3. Conceptual approach

### 3.1. Policy interpretation and sensemaking

Interpretation is critical to policy implementation: actors must make sense of what a policy idea means in order to prioritize, adapt, or disregard it in their contexts [7; 9]. New policy ideas don't replace existing ones but get refracted through actors' prior beliefs, knowledge, and worldviews [see also 6]. This is part of actors' *sensemaking* – selecting information, drawing meanings from it, and acting on them [44]. As such, the meaning of a policy idea is not a given, but actively constructed by individuals [7].

Spillane et al. [45] outline a cognitive framework which identifies three dimensions that shape policy interpretations. First, one's *individual cognition* – prior knowledge, values, and beliefs – inform the meaning they draw from a policy. Second, interpretation of policy ideas may also depend on *situated contexts* – organizational or professional norms, interpersonal interactions and discussions, practical considerations, etc. [e.g. 8; 46]. Third, sensemaking can also be shaped by visible *policy representations* or cues that suggest what problems a reform seeks to address, how, and what it prioritizes in doing so [e.g. 43; 47]. Unlike behavioral approaches that focus only on what actors do, this cognitive lens explains how the meanings actors construct inform their actions.

Research from U.S. contexts illustrate the importance of interpretation in pedagogical reforms. Actors who develop *form-focused* interpretations of a new pedagogy (centered on activities, materials, assessments, etc.) instead of a *function-focused* interpretation (centered on

purpose, epistemic reorientation, skill, etc.) were likely to support and enact only superficial changes and not deeper, holistic ones in instruction [7; 9]. Applying this analytic focus on sensemaking and interpretation to the context of FLN, this study uncovers the various meanings frontline actors draw when it is prioritized as a policy idea.

### 3.2. Floating signifiers

A *floating signifier* is a term whose meaning remains indeterminate, enabling it to circulate across contexts without being fixed to a single definition [48]. Its power lies in its malleability: different actors can project their own interpretations onto it while treating it as universally meaningful [49]. This vagueness does not make the term empty; rather, it enables the signifier to host multiple, even conflicting, meanings while retaining an appearance of broad relevance. Such openness allows it to operate as a point of consensus, generating support without demanding conceptual precision [49]. Consequently, floating signifiers often legitimize policy positions not through definitional clarity but through their capacity to appear meaningful to everyone while committing to nothing specific. I use this concept to explain how FLN circulates as a policy idea in practice and discourse. As the findings will show, while FLN appears to provide coherence as a policy priority, its meanings vary widely across actors – often in ways that reproduce existing educational practices.

## 4. Methods

Epistemologically, this study views language as the medium through which sensemaking occurs and policy understanding develops. Building on Ball's [50] notion of *policy as text*, I approach FLN as a policy term whose meanings are produced through processes of encoding and decoding rather than fixed definition. Policymakers present FLN as an open-ended concept, offering little

definitional clarity and inviting multiple interpretations through selective policy cues. Language thus becomes both the vehicle for policymakers' intentions and the means through which actors construct meaning [12; 51]. While policy language may suggest particular meanings, actors often ascribe partial or divergent ones [9; 13]. Accordingly, this study analyzes how policy actors talk about FLN as an entry point into their understanding. Given sensemaking is a complex individual process, I use qualitative methods to study it.

**4.1. Design, sites, and sample**

This study draws on data from a larger project on FLN implementation in two Indian states – Haryana and Jharkhand. Although these states differ in socioeconomic conditions, education indicators, and learning outcomes, their FLN policies closely mirrored national NIPUN mission guidelines and were grounded in similar theories of change – including the problem narrative of a 'learning crisis' and the use of structured pedagogy, data-driven accountability, and frequent monitoring to achieve FLN outcomes.

This paper's inquiry is driven by a multiple case study or a collective case study design [52]. This involves the investigation of a complex phenomenon – in this case the frontline interpretations of FLN – across multiple sites, in order to generate deeper insights than what a single case might provide. Collective case studies often are used to gain greater external validity and generalizability than single or 'bounded' case studies [53], as the selection of cases is informed by the purpose of maximizing learning rather than achieving representativeness. I did not aim to comparatively examine different sites and explain variations between them; instead, I wanted to notice similar patterns across them in relation to the phenomenon of interest.

In each state, I conducted preliminary observations and informal interviews in 4-5 randomly-selected schools. Subsequently, I identified one school per state where I noticed

high-levels of support for the state's FLN policies among teachers and principals, but little changes in day-to-day instructional practices. Hypothesizing actor sensemaking of FLN as the factor causing this striking gap, I categorized these two schools as *focal sites* for in-depth analysis of my phenomenon of interest and treated the rest as *supplementary school sites*. All teachers and principals in focal schools were included as participants in the first round of data collection. I also identified middle-tier bureaucrats involved in communicating FLN policies for these schools – such as cluster resource persons, block education officers, and district teacher trainers. I recruited several of them through convenience and snowball sampling. A second data collection round (guided by insights gained from focal contexts) expanded to supplementary sites to both rule out idiosyncrasies as well as to deepen the preliminary insights. The final sample comprised 52 participants (Table 1), spread across nine schools in four districts (two semi-urban ones in Haryana and two predominantly rural ones in Jharkhand). Participants' median age was 41 years, with their teaching or administrative experiences ranging from 2-26 years.

**Table 1:** *Participant sample*

| **State** | **Teachers** | **Principals** | **Block/cluster bureaucrats** | **District bureaucrats** | **Overall Sample** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Haryana | 10 | 4 | 7 | 2 | 23 |
| Jharkhand | 15 | 5 | 5 | 4 | 29 |
| **Total** | 25 | 9 | 12 | 6 | 52 |
| Male/female | 13/12 | 8/1 | 4/8 | 4/2 | 29/23 |

### 4.2. Data collection and analysis

Following IRB approval, I conducted fieldwork between 2023 and 2025, after the rollout of state FLN policies (2021-22). Data collection occurred in two phases. In the first, I conducted semi-structured interviews with teachers, principals, and local bureaucrats (n = 18) in focal sites, alongside observations in classrooms, schools, government offices, and training or monitoring settings. Interviews focused on three components: 1) awareness of and reactions to FLN policies; 2) definitions and understanding of FLN; and 3) perceived changes in roles and practices. During observations, I documented instances where actors used the term FLN in their day-to-day activities, recording both verbatim quotes and their discursive context.

Preliminary analysis revealed inconsistency and ambiguity in how FLN was defined and discussed, prompting a second data collection phase. Follow-up interviews in focal sites focused further on three aspects: the descriptors and terms used to talk about FLN; probing what actors meant by them; and how they envisioned teaching and learning in pursuit of FLN goals. Interviews in supplementary sites incorporated select probes from the focal interviews and were more targeted on actor sensemaking. All interviews were conducted in Hindi, lasted 30-90 minutes, and followed written consent procedures. To contextualize interview data, I also analyzed state policy guidelines, circulars, memos, teacher handbooks, and training manuals – artifacts that contained FLN-related language commonly referenced by participants.

All data was analyzed in ATLAS.ti, with coding conducted in Hindi to preserve linguistic nuances; translations were made only for excerpts cited here. As the solo investigator, I used a detailed, iterative codebook to enhance coding reliability – listing down clear definitions, examples, and non-examples for each code, while also refining codes, recoding data segments, and maintaining a coding log which documented all coding decisions [54]. Analysis unfolded in

two stages, informed by policy sensemaking literature [e.g. 7]. First, I examined actors' definitions of FLN in relation to policy documents, identifying overlaps and divergences in how FLN was framed (e.g., as *competencies* or *pedagogy*). Second, I conducted *in vivo* and inductive coding of recurrent descriptors (e.g., *activity*, *textbooks*) to examine how their meanings varied across actors. To strengthen trustworthiness, I triangulated interview findings with observational data and retained only consistent patterns. Lastly, for validity, I conducted member checks with focal participants, wherein I shared my interpretations of how they understood FLN. The findings below are organized to reflect this analytic progression – from definitions, to discourse, and finally to the underlying conceptions of teaching and learning associated with FLN.

**4.3. Researcher positionality**

My fieldwork in Haryana and Jharkhand was shaped by the advantages and constraints of my social identity. As a Hindi-speaking, privileged-caste man working in deeply patriarchal and caste-stratified contexts, I gained access to schools and communities that might have been closed to others. My previous experience as a schoolteacher in India often positioned me as an *insider* during fieldwork, encouraging participants – especially educators – to speak with an ease reserved for someone who felt 'one of their own'. Yet my affiliation with an elite foreign university simultaneously marked me as an *outsider*, leading some participants to question my motives or limit what they shared. My pedagogical background as a teacher and graduate training allowed me to push conversations beyond surface-level articulations of FLN and to interrogate participants' reasoning in ways central to this study of sensemaking. This also shaped my analytic evaluations of participant perspectives on teaching and learning as deep or superficial, etc. During data collection and analysis, recognizing my own skepticism toward FLN

policies as a critical education scholar, I worked deliberately to identify and retain data that complicated or contradicted my assumptions.

## 5. Findings

I present my findings over three sections, where each builds on the prior. First, I show how the policy idea of FLN is understood by frontline actors in India, amid the backdrop of the term being inconsistently defined in global and national contexts. Arguing that a mere recall of FLN's definition is not sufficient to understand an actor's interpretation of the term, I then highlight the most common ways in which actors describe or explain it in their work and discourse. Finally, I zoom into these descriptions to reveal the ways in which FLN is interpreted and made sense of.

### 5.1. Definitions

#### 5.1.1. Inconsistencies on paper

What counts as 'basic' or 'foundational' in learning is fluid, shifting with global and local priorities [e.g. 55]. Despite the prioritization of FLN in the global education agenda, the term has "no consentaneous, technical definition" [2, p.4] – resulting in inconsistencies in how it is framed. One such inconsistency involves the interchangeable use of FLN and 'foundational learning' by international organizations and global stakeholders. Even though the latter includes "basic literacy, numeracy, and transferable skills such as socio-emotional skills" [56], policies and programs center FLN more [e.g. 1] – narrowing the focus to measurable reading and arithmetic skills, while overlooking other important transferable skills [57; 58].

Another inconsistency involves which skills are considered as FLN. Definitions of FLN often reflect the scope of the respective assessments that claim to measure them. For instance, in UNICEF's MICS [59] evaluations, foundational reading is evaluated as the ability to "read 90

per cent of the words in the text and correctly answer questions related to the story, interpreting and inferring the information contained therein." Similarly, foundational numeracy includes "number recognition… number discrimination… simple addition, and pattern recognition using sequences of numbers" (p. 13). In contrast, ASER – one of India's most popular learning assessments – defines FLN as the "ability to read letters, words, Std I level and Std II level text" and "recognise single-digit numbers, double-digit numbers, subtract and divide" [60, p. 320]. Although both claim to assess FLN, they evaluate very different competencies, revealing how conceptions of FLN are shaped by measurement priorities and constraints. As such, FLN is not simply measured by these assessments; instead what these assessments measure *becomes* FLN.

The absence of a singular definition of FLN translates into similar ambiguities in national policy discourses. India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 declared the achievement of universal FLN by 2026–27 an "urgent national priority" [14, p. 8]. Yet Table 2 shows how the NEP, the NIPUN Mission launched in 2021 to achieve FLN goals, and the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) define, for example, foundational numeracy.

**Table 2:** *Definitions of foundational numeracy*

| | |
|---|---|
| NEP 2020 [14] | "the ability to carry out basic addition and subtraction with Indian numerals" (p. 8) |
| NIPUN Mission [61] | "the ability to reason and to apply simple numerical concepts in daily life problem solving" (p. 19) |
| CBSE [62] | "being able to have 'number sense'. Identify numbers; Discriminate between numbers; Find missing numbers; Solve addition problems; Solve subtraction problems; Solve word |

| | |
|---|---|
| | problems” |

These definitions within official documents reveal inconsistencies in the skills emphasized (e.g., “carry out basic addition” vs. “solve addition problems”), missing components (e.g., the absence of “daily life problem solving”), and vague catchwords like “number sense” or “ability to reason.” State policy documents further reflect these variations: Haryana defines foundational literacy in detail – covering oral language, decoding, fluency, comprehension, and writing – whereas Jharkhand offers a simplified version emphasizing comprehension and expression through listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

In sum, FLN lacks a coherent definition across contexts, documents, and institutions. As with many policy catchwords, the term remains vague [50]. However, one common narrative connects its vague definitions: that any learning in advanced grades is dependent on and cannot be achieved without mastering FLN. The ambiguity of its definition but the consistent narrative of its ‘foundational’ nature makes FLN a *floating signifier* [48; 49]. This allows FLN to remain a focus area by consensus, despite having no shared definition. While Authors [24] have previously examined the use of FLN as a floating signifier to legitimize policy agendas, the following sections illustrate its floating nature in practice.

**5.1.2. Frontline understanding**

Most initial responses, when I asked frontline actors what FLN was, were usually vague. For instance, a teacher explained that

> FLN means *buniyaadi saksharta aur sankhyagyaan* [Hindi for foundational literacy and numeracy]. This includes those things that children should be able to do at a minimum. The basics… like let’s get them to learn at least this much.

Such a response reflected the simple recall of the policy term or phrase, as well as the 'floating' nature of how FLN was defined. While actors did not specify any particular competencies when asked about what they understood by FLN, they would often bring up how FLN was foundational or a minimum prerequisite for learning. As such, even without a clear definition, the term was not completely devoid of meaning.

When directly probed about the skills which they felt were part of FLN, most actors described them in terms of three broad skills – reading (*padhna*), writing (*likhna*), and maths (*ganit*). These skills were spoken about by some in relation to grade levels.

> A child should be able to read one or two words, and then in grade 2, they should be able to read a sentence of three words, four words. By the end of grade 3, read complete sentences, like that. (District Official)
>
> FLN basically tells us by which grade, how much literacy a child should have; how much they should be able to read and write and know numbers. (Teacher trainer)

These actors defined FLN in terms of skills corresponding to grade levels, closely reflecting the organization of FLN goals or targets (*lakshyas*) that the states had drafted. In both Haryana and Jharkhand, these FLN goals were communicated to education offices, schools, and classrooms through a variety of print media – like posters to be hung on walls of classrooms and offices or individual handouts distributed during trainings. The intention behind continuously circulating the state's FLN goals through such print media was to "have these targets at everyone's fingertips" (District official). This seemed to have been effective in a crude way, as several actors I interviewed used the language of FLN goals on these materials or referred to them when describing what FLN meant.

While the ability of actors to recall FLN as grade-level competencies in reading and math reflected their awareness and familiarity with the policy guidelines, two specific inconsistencies

came up. First, with respect to foundational literacy, most frontline actors spoke mainly about reading fluently.

> I think the main idea is that by grade 3, children should be able to read well. Without any hesitation, without any pause, they should be able to read their books (Principal)
>
> FLN is nothing but ensuring children know reading, writing, and math. I mean, they should be able to read continuously and smoothly, not with pauses here and there. (Teacher)

While a few actors described foundational literacy in terms of both fluency and comprehension, like described in state policy documents, most emphasized fluency alone. This likely reflects cultural notions of reading mastery in India, centered on fluent recitation, as well as the NIPUN mission's reliance on formative assessments that prioritize words read per minute, modeled on tools like ASER and EGRA [see for e.g. 63]. Notably, actors rarely discussed *what* children should read, closely reflecting the ambiguity created by policy documents that refer to 'simple texts' without clarifying what qualifies as simple.

Second, the inconsistency of foundational numeracy's definitions in policy texts (Table 2) was matched by how actors described it in their responses. Instead of mentioning policy text catchwords like 'number sense' or 'problem solving', actors simply defined foundational numeracy in terms of arithmetic operations.

> …like I mean they figure out how to add and subtract, at least that much they should be able to do. (Block official)
>
> The basic competencies in foundational numeracy are about operations, like multiply, add, divide, and subtract… (Teacher)

In describing foundational numeracy, children's ability to add and subtract were not described as conceptual mastery, but as procedural fluency. In other words, when actors defined foundational numeracy in terms of arithmetic operations, they referred to children being able to solve discrete,

decontextualized arithmetic sums using procedural approaches like the 'column method'. Akin to the framing of FLN goals, their interpretations were significantly more outcome-focused than process-focused; foundational numeracy meant children being able to "add two numbers" (in terms of calculating their sum), irrespective of *how* they did so. Amid this, reasoning about numbers or applying mathematical ideas to real life – which were key focus areas in some policy documents – were not brought up.

In sum, I find that the inconsistency in how FLN is defined in global and national policy texts corresponds to a loose, generic understanding among frontline actors – centering narrowly on reading fluency and procedural arithmetic. I suggest that these interpretations are a function of the vague conceptualization of FLN in policy; the ambiguity in policy texts enables selective, narrower interpretations based on ideas or skills that actors already assume as *basic* or *foundational*. At the same time, these interpretations are also a function of the policies' greater focus on FLN outcomes than processes; actors understood FLN in terms of simple, *visible* student skills like reading without stopping or adding two numbers, rather than more complex, less visible skills like comprehension or numerical reasoning.

**5.2. Discourses and Descriptors**

During the first phase of data collection and analysis, I noticed that while frontline actors defined FLN as certain competencies children should possess, they used the term FLN more broadly in their daily conversations and practice. Often, FLN became a shorthand for speaking about tasks, changes, or developments brought about by the NIPUN mission's guidelines. In Table 3, I list three such discursive categories. As shown, despite being defined as academic goals, the term FLN is used by frontline actors in relation to a range of aspects. Often the same person would use FLN to talk about different things at different times.

**Table 3**: *Usage of FLN in actor discourse*

| **FLN spoken about as:** | **Examples** |
|---|---|
| Pedagogy | "The way teachers used to teach before was not that good. But these FLN methods are great; they have led to improvement."<br>"Some schools have done well. There, the teachers are using FLN in class everyday, doing activities."<br>"FLN is child-centered. Like if you want to teach numbers, you use sticks or stones that children have access to." |
| Policy/ Program | "There have been many changes since FLN began. Slowly, we might start seeing results."<br>"How can we keep supporting the implementation of FLN at the ground level?" |
| Curriculum | "We have a state board textbook, and now we also have an FLN workbook."<br>"The FLN books that have come… really like them… students do it by themselves." |

Even though actors had defined FLN in terms of reading and arithmetic goals, their usage of the term in regular discourse indicated that they associated more meanings to it than just competencies. The examples in Table 3 illustrate some of these additional meanings. FLN's discursive use suggested that actors linked it with some *new* kind of pedagogies or instructional practices (pedagogy), with a set of policy changes that were implemented (policy/program), or

with a particular academic domain or subject area with its own textbooks and curricular sequence (curriculum).

Not only were these additional meanings evident in actors' discourses, but they were also visible in their day-to-day practices. For instance, during classroom observations, I noticed that teachers would allocate a separate time to *teach FLN* than the usual literacy and numeracy slots in timetables. Similarly, school actors treated FLN workbooks as a separate syllabus to cover beyond the regular Hindi and mathematics syllabi. Some bureaucrats discussed FLN-related monitoring or visits separately from regular school observations. In general, even though the ongoing focus on basic reading and math as part of the FLN mission was not *new* in Indian education [64], frontline actors spoke about FLN in relation to an innovative or novel change. I surmised that these peculiarities of implementation – where FLN was treated or spoken about differently than the regular literacy and numeracy programming – were a result of not simply what actors defined FLN as, but how they made sense of and understood FLN. Thus, for quotes like "the teachers are using FLN in class everyday" or "there have been many changes since FLN began" (Table 3), I wanted to uncover the underlying meanings of FLN in their responses – *what* actors perceived teachers to be using in class or *what* they felt had begun respectively. This underscored the need to probe beneath the language actors used to describe FLN and surface the ideas that persisted in their sensemaking – insights that informed the second round of data collection.

Subsequently, I began by identifying the common descriptors that frontline actors used while discussing FLN, FLN policies, or their implementation. Figure 1 shows the five most frequently used descriptors, identified *in vivo*, by actors in my overall sample (N = 52). The proportion of these descriptor frequencies among actors was roughly the same in both states.

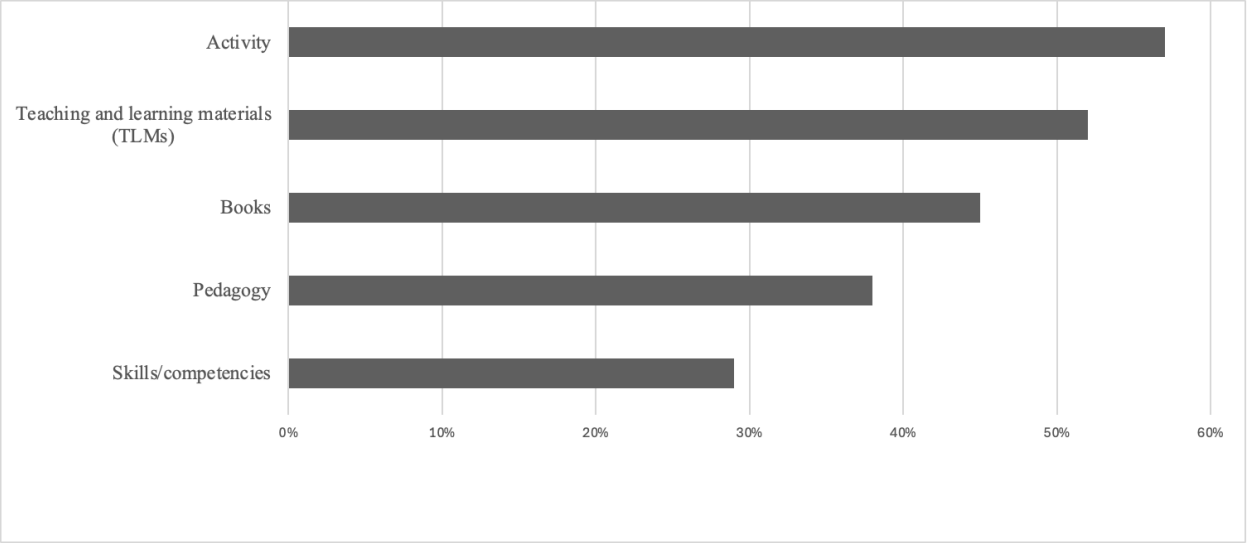


**Figure 1**: Common descriptors for FLN used by percentage of participants

Almost three-fifths of actors used *activity* while describing FLN or FLN policies. In fact, frontline actors were roughly twice as likely to use *activity* or *teaching and learning materials* (TLMs) to talk about FLN policies, than what most of them defined FLN as – *skills*. Drawing on Kolodner [65], Spillane [7] describes such descriptors used by actors as 'cognitive hooks' or labels that they use to hold their key ideas about reforms. In other words, frontline actors in this case associated FLN policies mostly with classroom activities or teaching aids, and viewed the changes brought upon by policies mostly in terms of those. This finding is consistent with those from studies of prior reforms in Indian education [e.g. 43], where school-based actors tend to interpret policies in terms of potential pedagogical changes – especially the use of teaching aids. One explanation for this is that actors in India are deeply embedded in a particular cultural model of learning – marked by rote-, repetition-, and lecture-centered instruction without any aids – which shapes their prevalent view of classroom practice [42; 66; 67]. Any potential challenges to

this model, even if they are a minor part of a broader policy, tend to get foregrounded as the aspect through which the novelty of the reform is understood.

Two key patterns emerge from Figure 1. Firstly, the frequency of descriptors shows that actors were more likely to associate FLN and FLN policies with more concrete, tangible ideas than abstract ones. Classroom activities, TLMs, and books were more readily *visible* ideas than pedagogical practices or student competencies. While in terms of the policy framing, the core narrative was the mastery of certain competencies, actors held on more to concrete policy signals [7; 9; 43] in making sense of what the policies were about or trying to do. In the case of the NIPUN missions, not only was a large chunk of the budget spent on developing TLMs, but the distribution of these materials – teaching aids, student workbooks, and teacher guidebooks – was the primary evidence of the policies for frontline actors [68], and thus, a key influence on their interpretations.

Secondly, while the FLN policies themselves were focused on *outcomes*, frontline actors brought up *inputs* (like textbooks or materials) more frequently while discussing them. This was, perhaps, in alignment with a conventional bureaucratic skew in education towards input provision, rather than the quality of services or the resulting outcomes [10; 69]. In India, frontline bureaucrats are often incentivized not for the quality of services they provide, but for how well they follow mandates and rigid guidelines [28; 30]. In the case of FLN policies in Haryana and Jharkhand, as I observed in district- and block-level administrative meetings, bureaucrats were appreciated more for their distribution of materials to schools in time, number of monitoring visits, etc. than for the instructional changes, quality of feedback, or improved learning outcomes as a result of those. As a result, such input-related tasks were the basis of how they understood and discussed the reforms.

Similar to Spillane [7], I argue that while these descriptors reveal which aspects of FLN policies *stuck* most with frontline actors, they do not fully capture their interpretations. For instance, a term like *activity* might be mentioned frequently, but it was not clear what actors envisioned when they associated it with FLN. To further understand how FLN was made sense of, it was thus imperative to probe beyond these descriptors and examine what actors meant when they used them.

**5.3. Meanings and Interpretations**

Analyzing what frontline actors meant by the descriptors they used showed that although they were familiar with the FLN learning goals, they largely associated the policies with discrete, surface-level changes in classroom practice. A predominantly *form-focused* understanding was evident across actor responses. In his analysis of changes in mathematics instruction in the U.S., Spillane [7] distinguishes between *form-focused* interpretations, as those which foreground only visible pedagogical features – activities, student work, materials, grouping, and *function-focused* interpretations, that center deeper awareness of the purpose, philosophies, and epistemological aspects of a learning reform. Among my participants, explanations of what they understood as *activities* (the most common descriptor) reflected the former.

> Because of FLN, we have been doing more activities… We did not know or do much of that before…children learn while playing. [we can teach by] reciting poems. We can do math on the beats of music. (Teacher)
>
> Activity means… like for example in maths, so we can use pebbles, wooden sticks, and all to teach. (District official)

Here, actors see *activities* solely in terms of their visible 'form' (poems, music, counting objects), rarely elaborating on their 'function' (what knowledge these were meant to build, why they might aid learning). Most actors spoke about *activities* in terms of classroom processes that

did not involve ‘chalk-and-talk’. As such, they didn’t see an *activity* as in service of learning objectives, but as a learning objective *itself*.

A similar understanding appeared in explanations of *teaching and learning materials* (TLMs) and *books* – the next most-used descriptors.

> If we talk about the materials kit, for language, there are lots of cards with vowels and consonants… In math, there are lots of things. Abacus, beads, some blocks. Children can use these to learn. (Block official)
>
> We have a teacher guide (TG) and students have a FLN book, which is a workbook. The TG tells us when to teach what, it helps us manage our syllabus… The FLN workbooks have helped a lot too. Students learn on their own. Those books have better fonts, nicer images, which makes them interested in learning. (Teacher)

Again, the functional dimension – the rationale for these changes – was largely absent. Actors recalled TLMs as lists of objects (cards, beads, blocks), not as designed supports for targeted skills. Similarly, the teacher guides and FLN workbooks cited in the second quote were distributed as part of the structured pedagogy approach and claimed to be designed according to ‘scientific’ teaching principles. Yet the teacher didn’t bring up any such pedagogical intentions; instead, she made sense of the books only through their form – as a syllabus-like sequence of lessons and as practice material with better visual aspects (fonts, images) respectively.

Beyond these form-focused interpretations, a second pattern I found in actor explanations was *decontextualized* understanding. Although FLN policies target early-grade literacy and math competencies, actors' interpretations were generic and centered on student engagement, rather than any subject- or skill-specific descriptions.

> For FLN, it has been basically laid out that no more rote learning or learning from the blackboard. Instead, we are to use learning activities, like songs. Children take a lot of interest in these activities, they learn much quicker through poems or songs. (Block official)

Though the official briefly mentioned the function-focused aspects of *activity* ('children taking interest', 'learning quicker'), his description wasn't tied to either literacy or numeracy. It reflected a generalized understanding of using poems or songs to get children to learn, not *what* they could learn as a result. Similarly, a teacher lauded the distributed TLMs:

> The FLN kits and materials that we have got… I mean they are really attractive and interesting… children enjoy using them, and are happier learning using them. It creates a lovely environment in the classroom, when we distribute them.

The teacher's explanation of using TLMs to improve children's FLN in his classroom does not specify which literacy or numeracy skills are aided by these materials. Instead, they are valued for creating a 'happy' or 'lovely' environment. Additionally, the teacher's characterization of their own role as 'distribution' suggested that TLM usage was understood as simply providing objects as an alternative to chalk-and-talk. This was echoed by others:

> Earlier, it was mostly blackboard learning… But children want something new, creative. Not to sit and write in their notebooks all day… And that's where I feel FLN and its approach have given children something new: learning using playing. (Teacher mentor)

The mentor's primary takeaway about *what* the reform was doing centered around a play-based teaching approach, instead of any subject-specific approaches.

One possible reason for the prevalence of these form-focused and decontextualized understandings is frontline actors' lack of knowledge about teaching and learning. While administrative bureaucrats in Indian education rarely have substantive pedagogic knowledge [28], even teachers and principals lack requisite levels of expertise due to the low quality of

in-service professional development [70; 71; 72]. Without the capacity to reason about instructional or subject-specific changes of a reform, actors default to interpreting only the concrete, visible aspects that contrast with familiar chalk-and-talk routines. A second plausible, and related, reason is the way in which FLN policies were designed and represented. NIPUN's implementation prioritized outcomes and quantitative targets while imposing guidelines, with almost no participatory planning or deliberations with educators [72]. As such, frontline actors had no exposure to the functional dimensions of FLN policies or the intended reorientations in literacy and numeracy; instead, reforms were presented to them as the provision of certain inputs and systems to achieve stated goals.

## 6. Discussion

The 2024 Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) documented improvements in FLN outcomes in India, attributing them to a 'systemic national push' through state-level FLN missions. ASER's evidence for this push included a majority of schools affirming that they had received government directives, teacher training, and funds or materials for FLN [60]. While this points to heightened policy visibility and outreach, my findings complicate ASER's optimistic narrative. Although frontline actors recognized FLN as a priority aimed at improving learning outcomes, their interpretations of these outcomes were largely procedural (e.g. reading without stopping, adding or subtracting, etc.) rather than substantive (e.g. reading with comprehension, developing number sense, etc.). As prior research suggests [e.g. 7], such narrow sensemaking can undermine meaningful instructional change. In this study, the urgency surrounding FLN goals did not translate into shifts in pedagogical mindsets or deeper understandings of teaching and learning.

Probing beneath actors' recall of the policy goals reveals that FLN was interpreted as more than a focus on literacy or numeracy outcomes. Situated within the growing global emphasis on FLN in LMICs, this study provides a novel empirical contribution by highlighting a gap between how FLN is conceptualized in policymaking and how it is understood in implementation. Using a sensemaking lens [7; 9; 45], I show that FLN was interpreted variously (as a new pedagogy, curriculum, etc.), yet consistently detached from subject- or skill-specific understandings. Instead, actors focused on the concrete form of reforms (activities, books) rather than transformations in practice. These interpretations were strikingly similar across sites, suggesting that they were shaped less by local context than by the common framing and design of FLN policies in both states. From these findings, I advance four broader arguments about the contemporary global focus on FLN.

First, FLN functions as a *floating signifier* – a term imbued with significance yet lacking a stable definition [49] – across global agendas, policy texts, and actor interpretations. In other words, FLN becomes a broad idea or catchword to signify *something* which is considered urgent and essential, and thus, easy to mobilize around. Yet, it has no clear meaning; what is understood as FLN varies considerably between actors and institutions, often shaped by measurement criteria or assumptions about learning. Though convenient as a metric for the global education agenda [1], FLN's vagueness allows diverse actors to project their own meanings onto it. FLN's apparent universality thus masks significant incoherence in meaning and practice. Celebratory narratives that equate FLN prioritization with a system-wide focus on learning warrant reconsideration; ambiguity may, in fact, exacerbate fragmentation rather than coherence.

Second, the design and framing of FLN policies in India exemplify the persistence of outcome-oriented reform paradigms in global education, particularly since the SDGs. Scholars

and policy elites often assume that setting a small number of clear learning goals will catalyze system-wide improvement [11; 23]. My findings suggest otherwise. When outcomes are emphasized without sustained attention to teaching-learning processes, reforms produce form-focused interpretations that are unlikely to transform practice. Instead, such policies become absorbed into input-centric logics, entrenched in LMIC education systems. Frontline actors primarily understood FLN through tangible inputs – TLMs, teacher guides, workbooks – thereby reinforcing the proceduralism these reforms purported to challenge. Even structured pedagogy approaches, promoted as evidence-based solutions for LMICs, were interpreted largely through the design and aesthetics of materials rather than their instructional intent, echoing findings from other contexts [73]. The absence of a deliberate emphasis on pedagogy within outcome-driven FLN policies risks reproducing old patterns under new labels.

Third, the interpretive inconsistency observed in this study should not be read as a failure of frontline actors. Variation in interpretation is expected in complex reforms, as actors make sense of policy through existing cognitive frameworks [7; 45]. Instead, I argue that this incoherence reflects weak policy design and communication. Ambiguous framing and selective prioritization leave actors to infer reform intent from visible *signals* rather than policy texts, which they seldom engage directly with [6]. Consistent with earlier Indian reforms [43; 47; see also 55], actors' sensemaking of FLN policies centered on material distribution, outcome monitoring, and prescriptive guides. This raises critical questions about policy design: which aspects of reform are made visible, which are obscured, and whether visible signals align with intended change.

Finally, these interpretations call into question the novelty of FLN as a reform agenda in India and globally. In India, the so-called 'systemic push' toward FLN is manifested mainly

through managerial infrastructures – dashboards, data systems, standardized teaching packages – rather than radical shifts in pedagogical thinking. Yet actors' interpretations of FLN continue to resemble those associated with earlier reforms in activity-based learning, child-centered pedagogy, and improved learning environments [40; 41; 42; 43]. Moreover, *the understanding of FLN as distinct from existing literacy and numeracy efforts positions it as an additional policy burden rather than an improvement of ongoing practice*. As Menon [64] argues, recent FLN initiatives in India display an apathy toward historical context. Given the limited success of past literacy and numeracy reforms in transforming either outcomes or mindsets, packaging FLN policies as a novel intervention risks rendering them symbolic rather than substantive [58]. This mirrors broader critiques of education policy, where technocratic solutions are often recycled without learning from prior failures [e.g. 64]. If the targeted focus on FLN is indeed *new*, this study asks: what, precisely, is *new* about it?

This study has several limitations. First, its multiple case study design prioritizes depth over generalizability. Besides due to the diversity of contexts in the country, these findings may not necessarily extend to other Indian states, as actor interpretations might depend on corresponding policy framing and communication. Second, while the study aimed to identify recurring patterns across contexts, it was not designed as a comparative analysis; a comparative approach may have illuminated more nuanced inter-state differences. Third, the analysis focuses on actor interpretation rather than implementation outcomes. While I suggest that sensemaking plausibly shapes practice for FLN policies, empirically establishing this link lies beyond the scope of this paper. Finally, as a solo-authored study, the data analysis is shaped by my positionality and interpretive judgments. Although the coding process was meticulously and

transparently documented, alternative readings of the data remain possible. Studies of sensemaking are, inevitably, shaped by the researcher's own sensemaking as well.

## 7. Conclusion

This paper examined how frontline actors interpret FLN and shows that, while an emphasis on it has increased awareness of learning outcomes, it has not translated into substantive shifts in ideas about educational practice. Instead, FLN is largely understood as an additional curricular–pedagogical requirement added onto existing literacy and numeracy programming, associated with more activities, teaching aids, and engaging materials. Although situated in two Indian states, these findings have broader implications for research and policy.

The global prioritization of FLN is often presented as evidence of coherent mobilization around learning. This paper challenges that assumption by showing that FLN operates as a floating signifier rather than a shared, stable concept. Future research should more systematically examine the extent of interpretive incoherence around FLN across stakeholders and how this shapes program design and classroom practice. Building on existing work in India [24], studies should also investigate the political, economic, and social conditions under which FLN has emerged as a dominant metric across LMICs despite its conceptual ambiguity. Equally important is extending this line of inquiry to examine how ground-level interpretations of FLN – as well as other learning reforms – mediate implementation, particularly why actor sensemaking continues to converge around familiar inputs, tools, and pedagogic forms.

For policy and practice, these findings underscore the need to take frontline sensemaking seriously rather than assuming uniform understanding of policy ideas. Interpretive variation is not a deficiency but an inherent feature of implementation and can serve as a productive resource

for adaptive policymaking [74; 75]. Coherence is therefore unlikely to emerge through tighter monitoring or top-down enforcement alone. Instead, it requires participatory policy design processes that surface and engage with actors' diverse interpretations, enabling greater ownership and alignment in sensemaking. Such efforts must be complemented by stronger professional development that deepens frontline actors' knowledge of teaching and learning, as well as more meaningful policy communication that articulates not only targets and tasks but the intended transformations in educational practice. Ultimately, the effectiveness of outcome-focused FLN initiatives will depend less on new administrative structures or slogans and more on how policies engage with the interpretive work of the actors who enact them.

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