"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 inclusivity in education reform design.

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 mobilized international organizations and donors to prioritize 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 (Crawfurd et al. 2025; Djaker et al. 2024) or bureaucratic apathy (Mangla 2022; Aiyar et al. 2015). 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 weak 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 (Dowd 2024), studies have continued to focus on the role of actors and stakeholders, while taking policies or programs 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.

Literature review

Following improvements in access, the *quality turn* in global education (Sayed and Moriarty 2020) 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 mobilized 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 rigor 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 et al. 2013), FLN *solutions* today mainly include instructional interventions, such as *Teaching at the Right Level* (TaRL) and structured

pedagogy (Angrist et al. 2020). Parallelly, recommendations to support these interventions include a systemic commitment towards FLN, frequent measurement of learning outcomes, and data-driven accountability (Crouch 2020; Pritchett et al. 2022). These instructional and administrative interventions form the core of most recent FLN reforms in LMICs.

Despite these recommended strategies to improve FLN, concerns about their uptake have led to calls for more implementation research (Dowd 2024). 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 et al. 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 prioritize other aspects of schooling, like vocation or socialization, instead (Crawfurd 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 et al. 2024; Wadmare et al. 2022), which weaken the imperative for instructional changes. These findings suggest that FLN or FLN reforms don't get prioritized 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 emphasizes 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 et al. 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 scrutinize actors, while taking policies as a given (Spillane 2000; Cohen 1990). Thus, these explanations do not adequately study actor perspectives in relation to reforms themselves. An alternative analytic approach based on actors' sensemaking (see Spillane et al. 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 categorization which shapes meanings, solutions, actor roles, and public perceptions (Weiss 1989; Edelman 1978). 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 mobilization, 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 & 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 2021; Hashim & Kearney 2024; 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 (Author XXXX). Viewing this crisis narrative as a strategic framing to mobilize 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. During the 1980-1990s, reforms in elementary education prioritized 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 the focus of initiatives like Operation Blackboard or Minimum Levels of Learning.

India's most recent National Education Policy (NEP) in 2020 recognized 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 & 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 emphasized 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 emphasized a crisis of foundational learning. Additionally, they prioritized 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 et al. 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 maximized

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 minutes. 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 synthesized 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-centred 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 recognized 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, recognized 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 prioritization 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*; categorizing participant responses showed a range of perceived barriers to children's foundational learning (Figure 1).
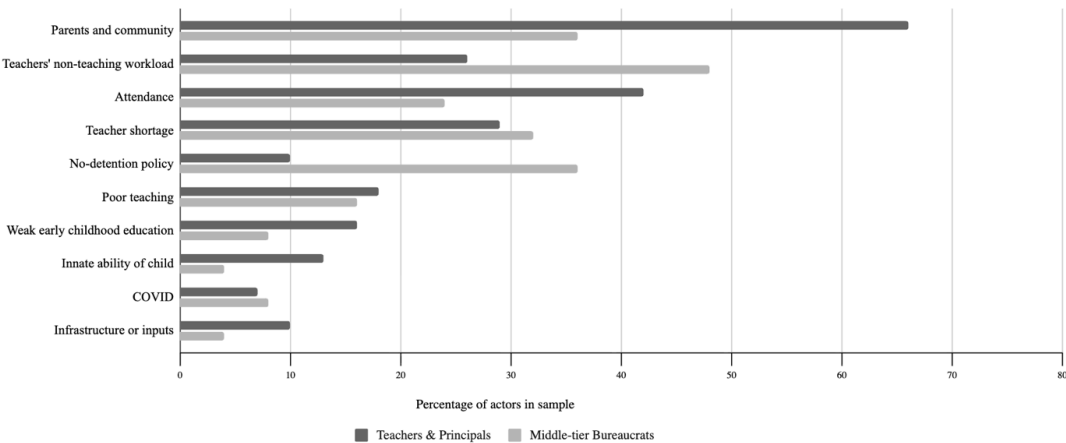

Figure 1. Reasons cited for low learning levels

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 emphasized 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)

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 prioritized 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 maximized. 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 prioritizing

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 recognize 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 (Djaker et al. 2024) and apathy (Aiyar et al. 2015). 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 three 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 (Tyack and Cuban 1995; O'Sullivan 2002). 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. Dyer 1999; Sriprakash 2010; Dasgupta & Kapur 2020). 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 emphasize 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* (Snow et al. 1986; Coburn 2006), 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 scrutinized 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.

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 emphasized 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 generalizable 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 prioritize 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 narrow, hegemonic problem diagnoses, but requires more participatory policymaking.

One way forward for sustainable reforms to improve foundational learning is what Elmore (1980) calls *backward mapping* of policy. He argues that forward-mapped policies inaccurately assume compliant implementation of the proposed solutions. Much like current FLN policies in India, such reforms 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 and interconnected 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 (Dowd 2024), 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 prioritized? 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 et al. 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 reimagined during formulation.

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