FOUNDATIONAL LEARNING IN THE GLOBAL EDUCATION AGENDA

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Synopsis

Over the past quarter century an effort to prioritize child learning outcomes and in particular literacy and numeracy—what we term the 'foundational learning agenda'—has gradually gained traction in the global education field. Although seemingly uncontroversial, the foundational learning agenda has attracted criticism as being reductionist and insufficiently attentive to cross-national differences.

This study analyzes factors that have shaped priority for foundational learning among organizations involved in the global governance of education, with reference specifically to low and middle-income settings. We find that historically six factors have been especially influential.

Three have facilitated attention:

1. Growing evidence of a global learning crisis and of a learning divide between and within countries, emerging especially from global, regional and national learning assessments;
2. Emergent evidence on successful country strategies to promote and achieve literacy and numeracy for all; and
3. Entrepreneurship by individuals and organizations that back the agenda.

Three have inhibited attention:

1. The Millennium Development Goals' (MDG) focus on achieving universal access to primary education and gender equity over other educational goals;
2. Opposition from some individuals and organizations—particularly teachers' unions—uncomfortable with the agenda's thrust and/or of its implications for their own accountability; and
3. Disagreements within the global education community on the content, merits of, and strategies for pursuing the learning agenda.

The future agenda status of foundational learning will likely be shaped by several factors. These include the norm-shaping power of the Sustainable Development Goals; the nature and strength of opposition by teachers' unions; and the ability of a foundational learning policy community to create strong internal governance mechanisms, transcend disagreements, forge a coalition, and build a common policy agenda based on evidence of what works to augment child literacy and numeracy.

Introduction

In the face of resource scarcity, global education specialists are engaged in heated policy debates. They disagree on, among other issues, the optimal allocation of resources across levels (pre-primary, primary, secondary, post-secondary, adult); the relative priority to be given to particular goals (including universal access vs. learning outcomes, and learning content [for instance, math, reading, fine arts, humanities, sciences]); and strategies to achieve these goals (for instance, the role of global learning assessments, and whether there should be universal learning indicators).

Amidst these debates a community has emerged whose priority is, what might be called, 'foundational learning.' Its members' primary concern is transcending a learning crisis in low and middle-income settings: an estimated 250 million children who, despite increased enrollments over the last decade, leave school unable to read, write or perform basic mathematics.[i] Most proponents of the foundational learning agenda share four core beliefs:

(1) Education should focus, first and foremost if not exclusively, on imparting literacy and numeracy;
(2) Education strategies must be assessed primarily on their effectiveness in achieving learning;
(3) Global, regional and national learning assessments are crucial for ensuring progress and accountability; and
(4) While all levels are important, primary school should be prioritized because future learning is dependent on developing foundational literacy and numeracy skills in early grades.

Some global education actors have criticized foundational learning proponents on each of these points, arguing that their agenda 1) is reductionist for de-emphasizing a broader set of subjects (i.e., the fine arts, sciences, and humanities), skills (i.e., cognitive skills for critical and innovative thinking and problem solving, as well as non-cognitive skills, such as empathy, openness to experience and other perspectives, and intrapersonal/communicative skills) and behaviors (i.e., aptitude for networking and interacting with people of different backgrounds and

behavioral capacities to engage in proactive actions) that children need in order to thrive (I1, I12-I16, I26); [ii] 2) pays insufficient attention to the inputs needed to achieve learning, in favor of a focus on outputs (I5, I6, I8, I9, I23); 3) neglects difficulties in and potential adverse effects of learning assessments, including the incomparability of certain indicators across languages and contexts (I4, I16, I21, I24, I27); [iii] and 4) inappropriately de-emphasizes investment in education levels other than primary school (I1, I6, I8, I16, I20).

Despite these critiques, the foundational learning agenda gradually has gained traction. In the mid-2000s it emerged as an explicit strategic focus of a number of organizations involved in shaping global education priorities, including the World Bank, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID), the Hewlett Foundation, and Pratham Education Foundation (Pratham), an education non-governmental organization in India. Most recently, it has had a prominent place in global development goal-setting discussions, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and the post-Education for All (EFA) goals.

This paper examines the emergence of and prospects for the foundational learning agenda. Doing so is crucial, since its trajectory undoubtedly will shape the way education is pursued during the SDG era. In the sections that follow we present a conceptual framework on agenda-setting processes in global development that we use to organize our analysis. We then discuss the study's methodology. Thereafter we present a historical narrative that outlines the major developments in global education pertaining to this agenda over the last twenty-five years. We then draw on the conceptual framework to consider the factors that have facilitated and inhibited the emergence of attention. The concluding section considers factors that may shape the future of the agenda.

Conceptual framework

Issues compete for scarce resources in all social development fields, including education, health, environment and poverty alleviation. The fields themselves are also in competition; educational specialists, for instance, have wondered why development agencies choose to devote so many

more resources to global health than global education.[iv, v] Social scientists systematically investigate how issues come to attract attention, a phase of the policy process termed 'agenda-setting.'

We ground this study in a conceptual framework on agenda-setting (table 1) originally developed to understand the effectiveness of global health networks—webs of individuals and organizations linked by a shared concern for a particular issue.[vi] The framework consists of three categories of factors.

One category, *network and actor features*, concerns factors internal to the network involving strategy and structure, and attributes of the actors that constitute the network or are involved in creating it. This category pertains to how networks and the individuals and organizations that create and comprise them exercise agency; the presumption is that actors make a difference, and that they vary in their capacity to transform the world. Three factors in this category are particularly germane to this study: the quality of *leadership*—the individuals and organizations who serve as the main champions for a cause; *composition*—the level of diversity among these individuals and organizations; and *framing strategies*—the ways in which proponents understand the problem and solutions, including their level of consensus and how they position the issue for external audiences.

A second category, termed *policy environment*, concerns factors external to the network that shape both its nature and the effects the network hopes to produce. The presumption is that networks do not operate in a vacuum; rather, they, and the changes in the world they desire, are shaped by forces outside them. Among the relevant factors in this category are *allies and opponents*—actors who are not core members of the network that addresses the issue but who nevertheless have a strong stake in the outcomes; and *norms*—widely held expectations about standards of behavior in a particular issue area, and about which issues ought to be prioritized. Global focusing events—moments in time when conditions align to draw attention to an issue—often have major norm-setting power. Examples of global focusing events include major global goal-setting exercises such as the MDGs, scientific discoveries, and natural disasters.

The third category, commonly referred to as *issue characteristics*, concerns features of the problem the network seeks to address. The idea is that issues vary on a number of dimensions that make them more or less difficult to tackle. Two of the most crucial dimensions are *severity*—the social and economic costs of a problem, and the way in which these costs are perceived, and *tractability*—the availability of solutions, including perceptions surrounding its capacity to be solved.

Table 1: Agenda-setting framework on global development network emergence and effectiveness

Category	Factor	Presumed direction of causality	Explanation
Network and actor features	1. Leadership	+	A network is more likely to emerge and be effective if capable, well-connected and widely-respected champions are available to lead the cause.
	2. Governance	+	Networks are more likely to be effective if they have appropriate governing structures capable of facilitating collective action and resolving disputes.
	3. Composition	+/-	Networks that link diverse actors are more likely to generate creative solutions to problems but also to be hampered by disagreements.
	4. Framing strategies	+	Networks are more likely to be effective when their members have discovered ways of positioning the issue that resonate with external actors, especially political elites.
Policy environment	5. Allies and opponents	+/-	Groups with aligned interests will facilitate network expansion and power. Opponents will challenge network legitimacy and issue promotion, but their existence may inspire mobilization.
	6. Funding	+/-	Donor funding may facilitate network emergence and effectiveness and a dearth may hinder prospects for sustainability, but over-reliance on these resources may hamper network legitimacy.
	7. Norms	+/-	Widely held expectations that global actors address a particular problem facilitate network emergence. Networks that advocate for policies that violate strong social values face obstacles.
Issue characteristics	8. Severity	+	Network emergence and effectiveness are more likely surrounding problems that are perceived to have high adverse effects.
	9. Tractability	+	Networks are more likely to form and be effective surrounding problems for which solutions exist or are perceived to exist, especially if proposed solutions are politically uncontroversial.
	10. Affected groups	+	Network emergence and effectiveness are more likely on issues that affect groups that are readily identifiable, that societies view sympathetically, and that are able to advocate for themselves.

Methods

We used a qualitative case study methodology to conduct this investigation. We drew on multiple data sources, including published and unpublished scholarship, organizational reports and semi-structured interviews, in order to piece together the modern history of global attention to foundational learning. National and local developments are of course also crucial, but this particular study focuses on dynamics among global actors, especially those involved in global education governance. We employed process-tracing[1][vii, viii] to analyze the data, examining the causal mechanisms that connect the outcome of interest—global attention to foundational learning—to the factors that may stand behind that outcome. A qualitative case study methodology involving process-tracing is better suited than other approaches—including econometric analyses and structured surveys—since it examines a phenomenon in its real-life setting.

Literature Review

We searched databases and collected reports from organizations involved in global education funding, provision and advocacy. We searched the following databases for articles and reports published between January 1, 1980, and May 15, 2016: Google Scholar, Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), ProQuest, and JSTOR. We used the search terms "education", "global education", "learning", or "access agenda" in combination with "assessment", "developing countries", "priority", "policy", "strategy", "funding", "burden", "crisis", "reading", "literacy", "numeracy", and "perception". We also used the names of key global education institutions and learning assessments (i.e., the Learning Metrics Task Force (LMTF), the World Bank, Pratham, Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), etc.) as part of our literature search. We restricted our search to articles in English that were broadly associated with global education actors; documents pertaining to the strategies, arguments, and policies these actors have pursued to improve

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[1] According to David Collier: "Process tracing is an analytic tool for drawing descriptive and causal inferences from diagnostic pieces of evidence—often understood as part of a temporal sequence of events or phenomena... It is the systematic examination of diagnostic evidence selected and analyzed in light of research questions and hypotheses posed by the investigator." See http://polisci.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/people/u3827/Understanding%20Process%20Tracing.pdf.

learning outcomes and education quality globally; and outcome data on learning, access and gender equity.

Key Informant Interviews

Between July 9, 2015, and May 9, 2016, we conducted 34 semi-structured interviews by telephone or Skype with key informants in the global education field, including those involved in advancing the foundational learning agenda and their critics. We identified these individuals through our literature review and by asking interviewees whom they considered to be most centrally involved in global education governance and policy debates. Fifty individuals were contacted for interview by e-mail, of which 34 accepted (68% response rate). The individuals that we interviewed are representatives from major donors, United Nations' (UN) agencies, NGOs, research institutions, government and inter-governmental organizations engaged in education discussions and policy work at the global level (table 2). We interviewed individuals from low, medium, and high-income countries. Using a purposive rather than sampling selection strategy, we aimed to reach theoretical saturation[ix]—the point at which all major themes and concepts have been identified and additional data collection is unlikely to reveal new information.

Table 2: Key Informant Institutional Affiliations

Key Informant Institutional Affiliations
Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) Centre
American Educational Research Association (AERA)
Brookings Institution, Center for Universal Learning
Cambridge University
Center for Global Development (CGD)
Center on Globalization and Sustainable Development
Commonwealth Teachers' Group (CTG)
Comparative and International Education Society (CIES)
Department for International Development (DFID)
Earth Institute
Education for All Global Monitoring Report, UNESCO
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis Journal
Education International (EI)
European Commission (EC)
Global Partnership for Education (GPE)
Global Unions Working Group on Migration
Harvard University
Hewlett Foundation
International Institute for Education Planning (IIEP), United Nations Educational, Scientific, Cultural Organization (UNESCO)
Inter-American Dialogue
International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA)
International Literacy Institute
Learning Metrics Task Force (LMTF)
MDG Centre
New Zealand Ministry of Education
Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)
Partnership for Educational Revitalization in the Americas (PREAL)
Pratham
Research for Equitable Access and Learning (REAL) Centre
RESULTS Education Fund
Results for Development (R4D)
Save the Children
Stanford University
The World Bank
University of Pennsylvania
U.S. National Academy of Science's National Research Council's Board in International and Comparative Studies in Education
UNESCO
UNICEF
United States Department of Education
University of Pennsylvania
United States Agency for International Development (USAID)

The interviews lasted on average one hour and, with permission from the key informants, were recorded and transcribed. The study protocol was cleared through the Institutional Review Board of American University, which granted the study exempt status because it focused on public

policy and was deemed to pose minimal risk to informants. All interview transcriptions and notes were de-identified and secured in password-protected documents to ensure respondent confidentiality. We asked each interviewee individualized, open-ended questions, tailored to his or her background and involvement in global education efforts. In reporting the interview data, we assigned each key informant a number, and listed his or her most prominent institutional affiliation type (table 3). Questions focused on priority-sitting within key institutions involved in global education practice and funding; the education goals and strategies of key organizations within the global education policy community; the way in which they have organized to manage and transcend internal differences; how they have publically positioned concerns to attract political support; and the extent to which they have taken advantage of political opportunities and addressed opposition. The appendix includes the interview questionnaire guide.

Table 3: Key informant number and most prominent institutional affiliation type
(Key informant citations in text refer to these numbers)

Key Informant Number	Institutional Affiliation
1	Donor
2	Donor
3	Academic/Research
4	UN Agency
5	NGO
6	Academic/Research
7	Donor
8	NGO
9	NGO
10	Donor
11	Donor
12	Donor
13	Donor
14	Donor
15	UN Agency
16	UN Agency
17	Donor
18	NGO
19	NGO
20	Academic/Research
21	NGO
22	Donor
23	Academic/Research
24	Funder
25	NGO
26	NGO
27	Donor
28	NGO
29	NGO

Analytical procedures

We coded the collected information, using the categories and factors of the conceptual framework delineated above. We also organized the data historically in order to develop a narrative on the emergence of global attention to foundational learning. As we conducted the coding, we considered evidence concerning which factors were driving and inhibiting attention to this agenda. Finally, we solicited feedback from five key informants and an additional two external reviewers, who provided feedback on the study's historical accuracy and the causal analysis.

<p style="text-align:center">**Historical overview**</p>

In the modern history of global education[2] (table 4), actors have attended to foundational learning in some form at least since the adoption of the World Declaration on Education for All (EFA) in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990,[x] and from a longer-term historical perspective ever since the French Revolution.[xi] However, attention has been particularly marked since the mid-2000s, when several institutions involved in global education made foundational learning an explicit organizational priority. Presently, foundational learning is squarely on the global education agenda insofar as it is a subject that global education actors consider centrally at high-level forums. However, it is controversial: many of these actors question the four premises, noted in the introduction, that foundational learning proponents advance.

Table 4: Selected major developments in modern history of global education pertaining to learning agenda

Year	Event
1960s-1980s	
1960	The IEA Pilot Study, the first international study of educational achievement, conducted across 12 high-income countries
1970	IEA's Six Subject Study marks the first time that several LMICs participate in an international study of educational achievement
1990s	
1990	World Conference on EFA in Jomtien, where leaders came together to commit to universal primary education
1993	PASEC created, a literacy and numeracy assessment covering 13 countries in francophone West Africa
	LLECE created, a literacy and numeracy assessment covering countries in Latin America and Caribbean
1995	SACMEQ created, a literacy and numeracy assessment covering countries in Anglophone East Africa
	TIMSS created, a science and numeracy assessment mostly covering high-income countries

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[2] Use of the term global education in this paper pertains specifically to the education agendas of LMICs, rather than to universal education including high-income countries.

1996	OECD's Shaping the 21st century: The contribution of development co-operation, emphasized achievement of universal primary education and gender parity
1997	PISA created, a science, numeracy, and literacy assessment of 15-year-old students
2000s	
2000	World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal; goal 6 focused on foundational learning
	MDG Declaration, two education goals focused on universal primary education (goal 2) and gender parity (goal 3)
2001	PIRLS, an assessment of reading comprehension mostly in high-income countries
	Pritchett's study *Where Has All the Education Gone?* provided evidence that countries that improve learning outcomes also enhance economic outcomes
2002	Pratham's Learn to Read Campaign launched
2003	First EFA Global Monitoring Report (GMR) established to monitor progress of EFA goals
2005	ASER created, a household-based, citizen led survey that assesses literacy and numeracy in India
	EFA GMR: *Education for all: the quality imperative* published, the issue is dedicated to education quality
2006	Hewlett's QEDC initiative launched, focused on improving learning outcomes in LMICs
	EGRA created, USAID's literacy assessment for LMICs
	Filmer, Hasan and Pritchett recommend replacing current education MDG with learning goal post-2015
2007	Pratham's Read India Initiative launched on national scale
	EGMA created, USAID's numeracy assessment for LMICs
2008	Pratham's ASER Centre established in India
	Hewlett's QEDC strategy formulated; the two strategies concern highlighting the learning crisis and testing potential solutions to overcome it
	World Bank commissioned study *Education and Economic Growth* published, providing evidence that countries that improve learning outcomes (not education access), enhance economic outcomes
2009	*Learning for all: DFID's education strategy 2010-2015* published
	UWEZO created, a household-based, citizen-led assessment in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda
2010s	
2010	GPE/FTI adopted two reading skill indicators
2011	*2020 World Bank Education Sector Strategy 2020: Learning for All Investing in People's Knowledge and Skills to Promote Development* adopted focus on "learning for all"
	USAID's Education Strategy 2011-2015, Education: Opportunity through Learning published; adopted three goals, the first of which was explicitly focused on improving reading skills
	The Brookings Institution report *A Global Compact on Learning: Taking action on education in developing countries* published
	Beekungo, a household-based, citizen-led assessment in Mali
	Jangandoo, a household-based, citizen-led assessment in Senegal
2012	LMTF convened to build technical consensus around global learning indicators
	GPE Strategic Plan: 2012-2015 published; 1 of the 4 strategic goals concerns learning for all and children mastering basic literacy and numeracy skills
	Ending Poverty in our Generation: Save the Children's vision for a post-2015 framework published, focusing on learning quality and outcomes
	Save the Children's Literacy Boost Program launched, an assessment of literacy in 24 LMICs
	Observatory of Learning Outcomes established by the UIS
	Gordon Brown named the UN Special Envoy for Global Education
2013	PISA for Development launched, adapting PISA assessment for LMICs
	LMTF published recommendations: *Toward Universal Learning*
2014	EFA GMR (2013/2014): *Teaching and Learning: Achieving Quality for All* published, the first GMR dedicated to learning
	Open Working Group of the UN General Assembly announced stand-alone goal on education (SDG4)
	MIA created, a household-based, citizen-led assessment in the state of Veracruz in Mexico

	Muscat Agreement proposed overarching education goal to: ensure equitable and inclusive quality education and lifelong learning for all
2015	World Education Forum convened global education community, including government ministers and NGOs
	Incheon Declaration adopted by governments and underpinned the targets in the SDGs to provide inclusive, equitable, quality education and life-long learning opportunities for all
	Education 2030 Framework for Action adopted, an implementation document of the Incheon Deceleration, which was adopted by governments
	LearNigeria created, a household-based, citizen-led assessment in Nigeria
	PAL Network created, a network of LMICs dedicated to advancing citizen-led learning assessments and action
	United Nations High-Level Summit adopted SDGs; 5 of 10 education targets of SDG 4 focused on education quality and/or learning outcomes, and 1 explicitly on need to achieve literacy and numeracy
	The International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity convened to develop investment case and financing pathway for achieving equal educational opportunity
	UNESCO UIS began building a Global Alliance for Learning (GAL)
2016	Millions Learning: Scaling up quality education in developing countries report published, identifying where and how education interventions are scaling quality learning in LMICs

Global forums (Jomtien, Dakar, and the MDGs)

In 1990 in Jomtien, at a meeting convened by four United Nations agencies – UNESCO, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) – and the World Bank, delegates from 155 countries and representatives from international and non-governmental (NGO) organizations agreed on a declaration that emphasized education as a fundamental human right. The declaration mentioned learning as one among several priorities.[3] [xii, xiii] The global education community reaffirmed the EFA declaration in 2000 at a meeting in Dakar, Senegal, where it adopted six goals (table 5). Goal six emphasized foundational learning: "improving all aspects of the quality of education…so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills."[xiv]

Table 5: Education for All (EFA) Goals

Goal 1	Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children.
Goal 2	Ensuring that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to, and complete, free and compulsory primary education of good quality.
Goal 3	Ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life-skills programmes.
Goal 4	Achieving a 50 per cent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults.

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[3] These priorities included: early childhood development, school and educational quality, and the promotion of equity relating to poverty, gender, location, religious, linguistic, or ethnic identification, and physical or mental disability.

Goal 5	Eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and achieving gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls' full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality.
Goal 6	Improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills.

One year later, in 2001, the UN General Assembly approved the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The MDG education goals emphasized achievement of universal primary education and gender parity, mirroring two education-oriented targets advanced by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in a 1996 strategy document. [xv] The MDGs significantly narrowed the vision of EFA, which had included commitments to early childhood education, adult literacy, in addition to quality of education and learning outcomes.

Rise and spread of learning assessments

While the introduction of international large-scale education assessments began in the 1960s,[4] [xvi, xvii, xviii] there was a significant growth of learning assessments in the decade that followed the 1990 Jomtien meeting. During this time, global and regional organizations initiated a series of educational assessments in an effort to collect more information on learning outcomes—a trend that continues to the present—initiatives that would eventually provide data demonstrating a 'crisis of learning' in the developing world. In 1995, the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) launched the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), which measured math and science achievement at the fourth and eighth grade levels.[xix] In 1997, the OECD conducted its first Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), an evaluation of mathematics, science, and reading literacy.[xx] In 2001, IEA launched the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), which measured fourth grade reading comprehension.[xxi]

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[4] An interest in international large-scale education assessments within the global education community dates back to the middle of the 20th century. A group of scholars from Western Europe and North America gathered in Hamburg, Germany at the United Nations Education, Science and Culture Organization (UNESCO) Institute for Education to explore the feasibility of an international study of educational achievement.[4] This interest led to the creation of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) Pilot Study, which was conducted across 12 high-income and upper-middle income countries[4] in 1959-1960. The first international study of educational achievement, it tested reading comprehension, mathematics, science, geography and non-verbal ability. Several years later, in 1964, IEA conducted its First International Mathematics Study (FIMS) involving twelve high-income countries. It was not until IEA's Six Subject Study in the early 1970s that a number of low- and middle-income countries (LMICs)[4] began participating in such international education assessments.

These international assessments were largely designed for and conducted in high-income countries. At the time, low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) lacked the capacity to undertake national assessments.[xxii, xxiii, xxiv] By the mid-2000s, however, there were significantly more learning assessments designed for LMICs, many supported by international donors and organizations including the World Bank, the United States Agency for International Development, the OECD and the Hewlett Foundation (table 6). [xxv, xxvi, xxvii, xxviii, xxix] Particularly influential was the work of a grassroots NGO in India, Pratham Education Foundation (Pratham), which in 2005 developed and piloted a citizen-led, household based survey, the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER). The findings of ASER's 2005 pilot survey revealed that among the 700,000 children sampled, despite a 93% school enrollment rate, approximately half of the tested fifth graders did not know how to read, write, or do basic arithmetic.[xxx] Beginning in 2008, which was the year that Pratham's ASER Centre was established, ASER-like surveys spread to other countries, including Pakistan (2008); Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda (2009); Mali (2011); Senegal (2011); Mexico (2014); and Nigeria (2015). In 2015, the organizations affiliated with these surveys joined with Pratham to form The People's Action for Learning Network (PAL Network)[xxxi] to advance citizen led learning assessments and action.

Table 6: Selected major global, regional and national learning assessments

Year initiated	Assessment acronym	Full name of assessment	Assessment subjects	Funder/organizer	Geographic region covered
1959-1960	IEA Pilot Study	International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) Pilot Study	Reading comprehension, mathematics, science, geography and non-verbal ability	IEA	Belgium (French Community), England, Germany, Finland, France, Israel, Poland, Scotland, Sweden, Switzerland, the United States and Yugoslavia
1964	FIMS	First International Mathematics Study	Mathematics	IEA	Australia, Belgium (both Flemish and French Communities), England, Germany, Finland, France, Israel, Japan, Netherlands, Scotland,

					Sweden and the United States
1970-1971	The Six-Subject Study	The Six-Subject Study	Science, Reading Comprehension, Literature, English as a Foreign Language, French as a Foreign Language, Civic Education	IEA	19 countries total; included six low- or middle-income countries: Chile, Hungary, India, Iran, Romania and Thailand
1993	PASEC	Program for the Analysis of Educational Systems of the CONFEMEN	Mathematics and reading French	CONFEMEN (La Conférence des Ministres de l'Education des pays ayant le français en partage)	13 countries in Francophone West Africa
1994	LLECE	Latin American Laboratory for Assessment of Quality in Education	Language and mathematics in 3rd and 4th grade	UNESCO's Regional Bureau for Education in Latin America and the Caribbean	Latin America and Caribbean
1995	SACMEQ	Southern and Eastern African Consortium for the Monitoring of Education Quality	Reading and math in 6th grade	SACMEQ Coordinating Centre	Countries in Anglophone East Africa
1995	TIMSS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study	Math and science achievement in 4th and 8th grades	IEA	Mostly high-income countries (60+ countries)
1997	PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment	Mathematics, science, and reading literacy of 15-year-old students	OECD	OECD members, as well as some non-OECD member countries (70+ countries participated to date)
2001	PIRLS	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study	Reading comprehension in 4th grade	IEA	Mostly high-income countries (49 countries)
2005	ASER	Annual Status of Education Report	Reading and math of 5-16-year old children (citizen-led, household-based)	Pratham Education Foundation	India
2006	EGRA	Early Grade Reading Assessment	Literacy (oral assessment that includes pre-reading skills)	USAID, World Bank	40+ LMICs
2007	EGMA	Early Grade Math Assessment	Math	USAID	11 LMICs

2009	UWEZO	UWEZO	Reading and math of 6-16-year old children (citizen-led, household-based)	UWEZO ALA/ Hewlett Foundation	Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda
2011	Beekungo	Beekungo	Reading and math of 6-14-year old children (citizen-led, household-based)	Beekungo/Hewlett Foundation	Mali
2011	Jangandoo	Jangandoo	Reading and math of 6-16-year old children (citizen-led, household-based)	Laboratoire de Recherche sur les Transformations Économiques et Sociales (LARTES)/ Hewlett Foundation	Senegal
2012	Literacy Boost Program	Literacy Boost Program	Reading	Save the Children	24 LMICs
2013	PISA for Development	PISA for Development	Mathematics, science, and reading literacy	OECD	Zambia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Cambodia, Senegal, Guatemala
2014	MIA	Medicion Independiente de Aprendizajes	Reading and math of 6-15-year old children (citizen-led, household-based)	MIA	State of Veracruz in Mexico
2015	LearNigeria	LearNigeria	Reading and math of 5-15-year old children (citizen-led, household-based)	The Education Partnership Centre (TEP Centre)	Nigeria

Sources on assessments: [xxxii, xxxiii, xxxiv, xxxv, xxxvi, xxxvii, xxxviii, xxxix, xl, xli, xlii, xliii, xliv]

Several influential and policy papers also provided evidence on a learning crisis in LMICs. In a 2006 study, three economists associated with the World Bank drew on PISA data to make the case that the education MDG should be replaced with a Millennium Learning Goal.[xlv] Also, a 2008 World Bank-commissioned study provided evidence that the cognitive skills of a population was more strongly associated than school attainment with higher individual earnings and economic growth.[xlvi]

Emergence of priority among core organizations

Influenced by studies and data showing a learning crisis in low-income countries, from the mid-

2000s, a number of organizations shaping global education priorities embraced foundational learning as an explicit priority, marking a rise in the agenda status of the issue.[xlvii, xlviii]

The theme of the UNESCO-published 2005 Global Monitoring Report (GMR) was 'quality'. The report emphasized the need to complement universal access to primary education with quality, arguing that "any policy aimed at pushing net enrolments towards 100% must also assure decent learning conditions and opportunities." [xlix] This was noteworthy, given GMR's role, as stated in the Dakar Framework for Action, to: "sustain and accelerate the political momentum created at the World Education Forum and serve as a lever for resource mobilization."[l]

Pratham launched its Read India campaign in 2007 to improve learning levels of children between 6-14 years. This campaign was created after the organization's 2002 launch of their Learn to Read program, which demonstrated that learning could be improved in a short time span using a low-cost model that could be replicated nationally. To assess the impact of their programs, Pratham partnered with Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) – a global network of researchers who use randomized evaluations to answer critical policy questions in the fight against poverty– to evaluate the impact of their programs on educational attainment.[li] The J-PAL impact evaluations reported that the Read India program increased children's learning levels by 84% in less than eight weeks.[lii]

In 2006, the Hewlett Foundation's Global Development and Population Program, working in partnership with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, established the Quality Education in Developing Countries (QEDC) initiative to focus on ensuring that children not only are in school, but are also *learning*. It developed a two-pronged strategy[liii] in 2008 to guide the initiative. The strategy focused on 1) highlighting the global learning crisis and generating political will to address it (i.e., via supporting citizen-led, household based assessments of children's learning) and 2) testing potential solutions to the global learning crisis that governments could adopt (i.e., funding organizations working with schools, teachers, parents, and communities to improve outcomes for children and funding evaluations to measure intervention impact). [liv] From 2007 to 2013, the QEDC initiative supported eleven school-level

approaches to improving early learning, accompanied by ten evaluations in India, Kenya, Uganda, Mali, Senegal, and Tanzania.[lv]

Beginning in 2009, some of the largest donors for basic education—including DFID, GPE, USAID, and the World Bank—launched new strategies focused on improving learning. For the first time, learning appeared as a central emphasis in a DFID strategic document—*DFID's Education Strategy 2010-2015* published in 2009—which stated a commitment to the education MDGs and to the broader EFA Goals with a "clear, prioritized strategic vision: quality basic education for all." One component of achieving this vision focused on improving the quality of teaching and learning, particularly in basic literacy and numeracy. [lvi] Similarly, *USAID's Education Strategy 2011-2015, Education: Opportunity through Learning* focused on achieving "measurable and sustainable educational outcomes" through the pursuit of three goals, the first of which was explicitly focused on improving reading skills. [lvii] In 2011, the World Bank's *2020 World Bank Education Sector Strategy: Learning for All*[lviii] laid out a ten-year agenda focused on the crucial goal of "learning for all."

In 2010, GPE (previously Education for All - The Fast Track Initiative) adopted two reading skill indicators: 1) proportion of students who are able to read with comprehension, according to their countries' curricular goals, by the end of primary school and 2) proportion of students who, after two years of schooling, demonstrated sufficient reading fluency and comprehension to "read to learn".[lix] In addition, GPE's partner countries were encouraged to produce baseline data on learning outcomes.[lx] One of the four strategic goals outlined in *GPE's 2012-2015 Strategic Plan* concerned learning for all and ensuring that "all children master basic literacy and numeracy skills by the early grades." [lxi] GPE's concern with early grade reading and learning was also reflected in their co-hosting of All Children Reading Workshops for the Africa Region in 2012,[lxii] and an All Children Learning Workshop[lxiii] in the Middle East and North African region in 2013, in order to mobilize partners from governments, civil society, and development organizations together to share knowledge and best practices on how to dramatically improve the learning levels of children, and especially early grade reading.

This attention to learning extended beyond major donors. By the beginning of the next decade,

planning commissions, parliaments, and ministries of education in many countries were publically acknowledging the global learning crisis and designing policies and programs to improve student outcomes.[lxiv] In 2011, the Brookings Institution's Center for Universal Education published an influential report titled *A Global Compact on Learning: Taking Action on Education in Developing Countries*, which called on all involved actors to support three priorities to improve learning, one of which emphasized the need to ensure the acquisition of basic literacy and numeracy.[lxv] Save the Children published its vision for a post-2015 framework in 2012, which explicitly focused on children receiving "good quality education" and having "good learning outcomes."[lxvi] In July 2012, Gordon Brown, the former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, was named the UN Special Envoy for Global Education, which is tasked with ensuring that "no child is denied the right to go to school and learn." [lxvii] The Office of the UN Special Envoy for Global Education seeks to generate political will, financing, and partnerships for accelerating progress on access and learning by working with UN agencies, governments, civil society, teacher unions, businesses, and other stakeholders.[lxviii]

A surge in interest around the topic of learning measurement was reflected in several major reports, institutions, and initiatives created during this time. This includes the 2008 EFA Global Monitoring Report (see Annex: National learning assessments by region and country), which was of the first to provide a global mapping of national learning assessments by country and region.[lxix] In addition, the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) established the Observatory of Learning Outcomes (OLO) in 2012, which produced a global catalogue of public examinations, and national and international assessments in primary and lower-secondary education programs in countries across the world. The catalogue served as a resource for countries interested in developing a national assessment, improving their overall system or joining a regional or international initiative.[lxx] OLO was also created to support the work of a Learning Metrics Task Force (LMTF), which was co-convened by Brooking's Center for Universal Education and UIS in 2012 in order to catalyze a shift in the global education conversation from access to access plus learning. The LMTF, which was comprised of three technical working groups of 186 experts and organized consultations engaging more than 1,700 individuals in 118 countries, sought to build technical consensus within the education community around global learning indicators and actions to improve the measurement of learning in all countries.[lxxi] The LMTF presented its recommendations in a 2013 publication titled *Toward Universal Learning*.[lxxii] In

the same year, UNESCO published the 2013/2014 GMR report titled *Teaching and Learning: Achieving Quality for All*,[lxxiii] which stressed the need to invest wisely in teachers, improve instruction, and pursue reforms aimed at strengthening equitable learning—especially as post-2015 agenda discussions began.

Latest forums

Over the past two years, as the 2015 target year for the EFA goals and MDGs approached, the intensity of deliberations on post-2015 education priorities heightened. [lxxiv] [lxxv] Among the subjects that global education actors debated was the place of foundational learning in the post-2015 EFA and Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) agendas.

In June 2014, in a process parallel to the post-2015 EFA discussions, the Open Working Group (OWG) of the UN General Assembly announced a stand-alone goal on education in the proposed SDGs. The education goal was developed through a broad and intensive consultative process driven and owned by Member States, facilitated by UNESCO as well as other partners, and guided by the EFA Steering Committee. The goal drew on multiple education thematic consultations that began in 2012. Consultations among Member States, civil society and other key stakeholders were co-led by UNESCO and UNICEF to define the future of the global education agenda. In addition there were NGO consultations, five regional ministerial conferences organized by UNESCO in 2014 and 2015, and the E-9 meeting[5] held in Islamabad in 2014.[lxxvi] A Global EFA Meeting was held in Oman, in May 2014, where the Muscat Agreement was adopted, informing the global education goal and its associated targets and means of implementation as proposed by the UN General Assembly's OWG on SDGs. Although there were some minor differences – mostly around the specific wording – between the targets in the Muscat Agreement and those proposed by OWG, the goals were largely aligned.[lxxvii]

This process culminated in the Incheon Declaration, which the global education community adopted during the World Education Forum (WEF 2015), May 19th -22nd in Korea. Convened by UNESCO, UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF, UN Women, and the World Bank, the forum provided a unique platform for the global education community to come together to agree on a joint position

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[5] The E-9 meeting was attended by approximately 50 UNESCO officials, as well as a Minister or Deputy Minister and Senior Officials from Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria and Pakistan.

for the education goal and targets in the post-2015 development agenda. It also provided an opportunity for this community to chart the way forward for the implementation of the post-2015 education agenda through the Education 2030 Framework for Action.[lxxviii, lxxix] On September 25-27th, 2015, the United Nations High-Level Summit took place in New York, where the new global development agenda was adopted.[lxxx] The fourth (SDG 4) of the 17 goals called for the international community to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all." [lxxxi] Five of the ten education targets of SDG 4 focus on education quality and/or learning outcomes of children and adults, and one of the ten explicitly mentions the need to achieve literacy and numeracy among all youth and a substantial proportion of adults.[lxxxii]

Most recently, in September 2015, the International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity, which is chaired by Gordon Brown, supported by the Government of Norway and Prime Minister Erna Solberg, and composed of more than twenty world leaders, researchers, and policy makers, began reviewing the future of global education. [lxxxiii] Specifically, the Commission seeks to 1) bring together the best evidence from around the globe about what works to expand and improve learning opportunities; 2) agree on an investment case and agenda for action; and 3) inspire and persuade leaders to action.[lxxxiv] Around the same time, UNESCO UIS began building a Global Alliance for Learning (GAL), which is bringing together assessment agencies, national education authorities, civil society groups and the international education community to define and agree on the specific measures and instruments needed to consistently monitor the SDG education goal and targets over the next fifteen years. [lxxxv]

In sum, foundational learning now sits squarely on the global education agenda: it is incorporated in global education goals, is a central subject of discussion in high-level global forums, and many organizations central to global education policy formation embrace it as a strategic priority. Nevertheless, it remains a contentious subject. Members of the global education community have basic disagreements concerning which learning priorities should be emphasized; how learning should be measured; where decision-making power should lie in shaping the global learning agenda; which target group(s) of students should be prioritized; and what strategies should be used to advance a learning agenda. In the next section, we consider

factors that have shaped the trajectory of the foundational learning agenda, including these disagreements.

Factors shaping attention to foundational learning

Since the 1990 Jomtien conference three factors have facilitated attention to foundational learning: growing evidence of a global learning crisis (corresponding to framework factor 8: severity), emergent evidence on the tractability of the problem (framework factor 9: tractability), and entrepreneurship on the part of individuals and organizations (framework factor 1: leadership). Three have inhibited attention: the MDG focus on access to the neglect of learning (framework factor 7: norms), misgivings by a global teacher's union (framework factor 5: allies and opponents), and disagreements about the strategy within the global education policy community (framework factor 4: framing strategies).

Evidence of a global learning crisis (framework factor 8: severity)
Prior to the turn of the century there were few reliable learning indicators and assessments concerning LMICs (I2, I9, I24).[lxxxvi] By the mid-2000s, large-scale educational assessments concerning LMICs had produced sufficient data to demonstrate a crisis of learning in these settings, providing the foundation for the emergence of attention to the issue.

Around the time of the Dakar Forum in 2000, as one education proponent observed, "There was no data to show us the extent of the learning crisis" (I8). The creation and launch of several international and regional educational assessments—including TIMMS, PIRLS, PISA, PASEC, LLECE, and SACMEQ—did not begin until the early 1990s, and as of 2000 not enough data from these assessments had accumulated to comprehensively track learning outcomes in LMICs. Also, international assessments did not include many LMICs, and those that did only reported higher performing districts for some countries, such as India and China. [lxxxvii, lxxxviii] National-level learning assessments were not widely available in LMICs.[lxxxix]

By the mid-2000s, data from international, regional, and national learning assessments from the prior decade had accumulated, demonstrating a learning crisis in these settings. Funding by

donors, including the World Bank, supported LMIC participation (I1, I2, I14). New learning assessments specifically targeting LMIC settings were launched, including EGRA, EGMA, and Pratham's ASER in India. Development of EGRA began in October 2006, when the World Bank and USAID, through its Education Data for Decision Making project, contracted with RTI to develop an instrument for assessing early grade reading. The tool, an oral assessment that examines a student's ability to perform fundamental pre-reading and reading skills in about 15 minutes, was significant for two reasons.[xc] First, it helped LMICs begin systematically measuring how well children in the early grades of primary school were acquiring reading skills. Many of the existing leading learning assessments on literacy and numeracy (i.e., PIRLS, TIMMS) determined what LMIC students did not know, and could not ascertain what students knew (often because LMIC students scored so poorly, well below the floor of existing assessments). [xci] Second, the tool ultimately helped catalyze more efforts to improve performance in this core learning skill (I33). One respondent noted that Goal 1 of USAID's 2011 strategy (improve the reading skills for 100 million children in primary grades by 2015), was:

> …the result of EGRA. I don't think Goal 1 would have happened without the data, it was really the data showing the extent of the crisis and the fact that donors had been spending billions and kids were learning nothing. (I33).

EGRA rapidly expanded and was deployed across many LMICs. By January 2011, EGRA had been applied in nearly 50 countries and 70 languages. [xcii] Even more high-quality learning data concerning LMICs accumulated toward the end of the decade from sources such as Save the Children's Literacy Boost program, OECD's PISA for Development, and the citizen-led, household-based surveys inspired by ASER conducted in other LMICs.

In addition to significantly more data becoming available, analysis of the data to determine the extent of the crisis and what needed to be done to improve learning increased significantly. This was reflected in the growing literature from major research and higher education institutions including the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Harvard University, and JPAL (I34). This was also reflected in the growing number of influential commissioned studies[xciii] that highlighted the strong connection between learning and economic prosperity, and the weak connection between this outcome and access, the dominant focus of the MDG education goals (I1, I7, I23,

I20, I25). As one respondent observed:

> The economists have really pushed it a lot from both the macro perspective, to look at what are the macro factors at a country level that drive development, and at the micro level to look at what makes education systems more efficient, and so that analytic frame brought by the economists has pushed this agenda forward (I7).

Evidence on the tractability of the problem (framework factor 9: tractability)

A second facilitating factor was a shift in perceptions by members of global education and development communities on the complexity of addressing and measuring the problem, particularly as compared to access.

Access has always been understood to be easier to address and measure than learning. Some global education leaders believe MDG access and gender parity education goals and their indicators were chosen over other EFA goals precisely because of this fact (I2, I3, I23, I25).[xciv] Non-experts influential in crafting the development agenda easily understood access targets, and UN member governments believed increasing access was politically feasible and a moral imperative, as there were approximately 100 million out-of-school children of primary school age who did not have access to an education in 2000.[xcv] Moreover, the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) surveys and UNICEF's Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) were able to measure net enrollment ratios from data collected through schools and household surveys. [xcvi] As one education specialist noted:

> The international agencies who were trying to come up with how to operationalize the goals expressed in 1990 didn't really have the tools to monitor the learning aspect of education…[it was] easier to measure numbers, so [the focus became] enrollment rates, and UNESCO was already collecting data on enrollment rates, but not on learning measures…(I2).

Another commented:

> It's really hard work to improve the quality of schools. That takes a lot of political will and it meets with resistance. Everybody's in favor of building more buildings and hiring more teachers. Nobody fights that, and so that's a winner (I23).

After the mid-2000s, the perceived tractability of addressing the learning crisis improved with the creation of replicable programs providing some evidence that learning could be augmented in a short time span and in a relatively cost-effective manner.[xcvii] These included Save the Children's Literacy Boost program, as well as Pratham's Learn to Read and Read India campaigns. In discussing Pratham's programs, one of the founders reflected that it was the simplest things that worked best:

> What doesn't work is to pursue multiple goals at the same time. It's important to concentrate on reading and writing. When you achieve that critical goal, then you can move on to other things.[xcviii]

At the time, there were also several desk reviews by international donors to education – including the World Bank and USAID – highlighting new findings in neurological and cognitive science that pointed towards promising, relatively low-cost interventions.[xcix, c] In addition to this evidence, recommendations that emerged from the LMTF and the creation of an assessment catalogue by UIS, helped demonstrate that learning outcomes could be measured, helping to shift some of the perceptions around the tractability of the problem. The creation and growth of citizen-led assessments that embraced a low-cost, low-stakes, and inclusive methodology were also crucial. The results were easily understood and used by teachers, parents, communities, and local leaders to identify and address learning gaps. Most recently, in May 2016, the Brookings Institution's Center for Universal Learning published *Millions Learning: Scaling Up Quality Education in Developing Countries*, which identifies where and how education interventions are scaling quality learning in LMICs. The report includes 14 in-depth cases studies from around the world.[ci]

Entrepreneurship (framework factor 1: leadership)

A third factor facilitating growth in attention to foundational learning was the entrepreneurship of individuals and organizations committed to the agenda.

Around the time of the formulation of the MDGs goals the sector suffered from having no strong institutional champion for learning. As one respondent noted:

> Within the sector a lot of people were paying attention to learning [but] there was a lot of unhappiness that UNESCO hadn't been able to represent the education community very well in 2000 when it came to the MDGs…it wasn't a very good start (I25).

The absence of strong leadership for learning shifted in the mid-2000s, as a number of non-governmental organizations in low and high-income countries, foundations and multilateral and bilateral donors augmented priority. This shift is evident in strategic documents (i.e., DFID, GPE, USAID, World Bank, and Save the Children), funding allocations (i.e., Hewlett Foundation), indicator and assessment focus (i.e., OECD, IEA, GPE, Pratham, USAID) and the emergence of convening forums (i.e., LMTF, the Hewlett Advisory Panel for the QEDC

initiative).

A major force behind this shift was the emergence of champions within these organizations. These individuals were responding to emergent data from learning assessments, econometrics studies, and internal program reviews demonstrating a learning crisis in low-income settings, and the importance of learning to economic growth. [cii] Several also realized that an assumption that access would lead to learning—which underpinned the strategies of several of these organizations—was faulty (I8, I23, I25, I28). A World Bank education leader commented:

> As we moved through the period from the outset of the Millennium Development Goals, it became clear that that theory did not hold up and I think evidence was generated and experience was generated that demonstrated that no, access does not equal learning (I2).

And an education leader in DFID noted:

> The evaluations of the country programs that were coming back had some quite negative things [to say] about the quality of education in the countries that DFID was supporting. I think that was a bit of a wakeup call to saying well, in DFID there needed to be something more done to support learning (I6).

Champions from Pratham were crucial to this process (I12). They created ASER—the grassroots household-based, citizen-led learning assessment survey—with transformative intent:

> You work hard to get people into school but didn't really look at the learning levels, and kids were kind of going through school without basic skills being met, so we used the same logic that we used in the village report cards to decide that we were going to need to do something bigger and [at] scale in India, so that both reading as well as basic early years could get onto the radar of policy makers, planners, school systems and so on (I28).

The assumption that schooling equated to learning was widespread in India in the early 2000s – including among parents in the slum communities that the organization worked in. In 2002, Pratham's leadership decided to create a basic survey tool – the precursor to ASER – to assess whether this assumption was valid. They felt that assessing this would be important not only for bringing awareness to the global learning crisis, but for creating a basis to propel action at the grassroots level (I26).

In 2004, the new United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government came into power in India with a promise of focusing on learning outcomes. During this time, enrollment levels in primary school in India were already more than 90%, but little information was available on scale about

the outcomes of primary education. [ciii] Subsequently, in 2005, Pratham took on the task of evaluating the extent of learning across the nation. As one of the founders of Pratham explained:

> The government had just created a new tax to fund education, and we thought citizens deserved to know if their money was being used effectively and efficiently. [civ]

Within 100 days, the organization completed a national survey covering 16,000 villages and 700,000 children. The ASER findings would become an unexpected and powerful driver for bringing attention to the learning crisis at the national and global levels. It generated numbers that "stuck": despite 93% of children being enrolled in school, 50% of fifth graders did not know how to read (I23).   This finding would be heavily cited in the scholarship and reports of foundational learning proponents in the following years. Also, as noted above, Pratham's work influenced the adoption of similar citizen-led, household-based learning assessments in many other LMICs (I13, I22, I26, I28, etc.) and ultimately, to the creation of the People's Action for Learning Network—a Global South-led coalition. One of ASER's primary architects explained how it rapidly spread throughout the Global South:

> Our first spread, so to speak, was to Pakistan… a group in Pakistan had heard about ASER and asked if they could come and see what it was all about, and we said please join us. We had a big national workshop, and so they came and participated in that, and then in 2008 or 2009, they invited us to come and be part of – they pulled together many other groups... East Africa was the next one, which was facilitated by the Hewlett Foundation who had been watching what we were doing, and they were funders of Pratham for our programs, and they felt that…there were groups that they knew in East Africa and West Africa who may benefit from exposure to this. I would say a third way [ASER spread] was by [offering the tool to] groups like JPAL for their research project. I think word got out I think through those means as well…and we began to get invited to different forums to talk about it, so that probably spread (I28).

By 2010, ASER tool became so widely utilized in LMICs that global institutions including the World Bank, UNICEF, and UNESCO began engaging with Pratham and the ASER Centre's leadership in order to better understand their work, the ASER survey, and the assessment's findings (I28). Pratham also began to receive international recognition for its innovation and leadership in the area of education through the prestigious awards it received, including the Kravis Prize (awarded in 2010)[cv] and the Skoll Award (awarded in 2011)[cvi]. In 2012, the founder of Pratham received the esteemed Wise award, drawing international attention yet again. [cvii]

Champions within the Hewlett Foundation also played crucial roles. One pushed for an advisory panel of leading education scholars and practitioners not only to help guide the Foundation's

QEDC initiative forward, but to advance the learning agenda at the global level. She commented on her reasoning for maintaining this panel:

> The field isn't necessarily ready for this, but focusing on learning is the right thing to do for kids and it's the right place to go for the field, so we need a brain trust, if you will, and we need to figure out how we can get all we can out of that brain trust, and we need them to see themselves as ambassadors of this learning agenda as well, so we need to continue this legacy (I22).

Initially, the advisory panel of education experts was created by the Gates Foundation to review proposals for the $40 million that it had earmarked for funding learning initiatives in LMICs. Despite receiving numerous proposals by prominent organizations working in the field, the Gates Foundation ultimately decided to award the money to the Hewlett Foundation given its prioritization of advancing learning and the lack of intermediary organizations in the field that focused on improving learning outcomes during this time (I22).

At the time, the Hewlett Foundation had made a $20 million commitment to this issue via their QEDC initiative. This initiative's focus on the advancement of learning was largely the result of several champions that were influenced by key-informant interviews they conducted with experts at the global and community levels, as well as emerging evidence from the ASER 2005 pilot survey and similar data from smaller scale studies in African countries (I3, I22). These internal champions were instrumental in convincing the Hewlett Foundation's Board of Directors to focus efforts on learning (I3, I22).

The Hewlett Foundation's $60 million QEDC initiative[cviii] – which combined Hewlett and Gates' Foundations' $20 and $40 million investment, respectively– was instrumental to advancing the learning agenda in a couple of ways. The assessments and initiatives funded by the Foundation constituted a significant contribution to the existing evidence on how to improve student learning. Specifically, the Foundation provided $9.1 million seed funding to support the implementation of Pratham's Read India campaign, which was launched nationally in 2007 and sought to ensure that children achieve mastery of basic math, reading and writing.[cix] It also supported the rise of citizen-led assessments in several LMICs, with grants spanning five countries in Sub-Saharan Africa: Kenya, Uganda, Mali, Senegal, and Tanzania.[cx] In addition, the Hewlett Foundation played a key role in changing the dialogue within the global education community. It was the first time that a significant amount of money that originated from a

philanthropic source was dedicated to improving learning outcomes– a statement by itself. Furthermore, the initiative was directly involved in trying to influence the SDGs so that these did not, like the MDGs, focus only on enrollment and completion but actually incorporated learning outcomes and an indicator to track them. In order to do that, the Hewlett Foundation funded the Brooking Institute's Center for Universal Education, which was supporting the work of the LMTF to try to build technical consensus within the education community around learning measurement indicators.[cxi] The Hewlett Foundation simultaneously provided funding to NGOs like Save The Children and Women Thrive Worldwide for learning advocacy within the post-2015 development goals (I3, I22).[cxii, cxiii]

A champion within the World Bank also was influential in shifting her organization's education strategy, leading a process that led to prioritization of learning in Bank education projects. In reviewing the econometric data, she observed that there was significant evidence that access did not equal learning. She was particularly influenced by econometric work by Pritchett ("Where Has All the Education Gone?")[cxiv] and by Hanushek and Woessmann,[cxv] commissioned by the World Bank in the mid-2000s (I2). These studies highlighted the fact that children were not learning or not learning enough and provided evidence that countries that improve learning outcomes also enhance economic outcomes.

These studies created the basis for her to push for a shift to quality and a focus on learning outcomes. Beyond this, she understood the quality piece needed to be emphasized because if learning was not achieved, children were going to drop out of school, ultimately hurting the universal access agenda. An education specialist at the World Bank during this time observed how this leader convinced others for the need to focus on learning:

> [She] created more of a World Bank ownership of [the learning] agenda and conversation around [the learning] agenda that drew on the kind of quantitative evidence that would appeal to the various stakeholders that you have to convince at the Bank if you want to cut this on the table (I1).

In addition to ensuring buy-in of the learning agenda from within, she conducted multiple consultations over the course of 18 months with the institution's partners, including government, civil society, NGOs, and development agencies (I2). These consultations culminated in a strategy document, titled *2020 World Bank Education Sector Strategy: Learning for All.*[cxvi]

One observer of her efforts noted that the fact this individual was an economist facilitated her work. It:

> Helped make it easier for her to talk about [learning] in a way that resonated with the different audiences that needed to be convinced, so I think that was an asset that she could [speak] that language and understand what were some key arguments and key types of data that would need to be brought to the table. (I1).

Many of these individuals not only helped to re-orient the education strategies of their organizations, but also to influence post-2015 global education discussions at the global level. They were either individually a part of and actively engaged in the high-level post-2015 education agenda discussions (i.e., a leader from Pratham was co-chair of one of the high-level SDG forums) (I9, I12, I24, I26) or their institutions financially supported other organizations for the sole purpose of serving as advocates in that space to push for learning to be incorporated (i.e., Hewlett Foundation provided grants to Save the Children, Woman Thrive Worldwide, among other NGOs to advocate for learning's inclusion in the post-2015 development goals) (I13, I22).

MDG focus on access (framework factor 7: norms)

While data documenting a global learning crisis, evidence on tractability, and organizational champions helped to facilitate attention to foundational learning, several factors worked in the opposite direction. One was the MDG focus on targets for universal primary education and gender parity, resulting in attention to access to the exclusion of learning (I8, I25). [cxvii,cxviii,cxix,cxx,cxxi,cxxii,cxxiii, cxxiv] Despite the extensive discussions around the MDGs, the education-focused MDGs were virtually the same as the 1996 education International Development Targets – focusing on access and gender parity. The four other EFA targets advanced at Dakar were left aside. As one member of the global education community reflected:

> There was a lot of unhappiness in the education community – including by myself – that when the Millennium Development Goals were adopted, the learning aspect had receded…[we] ended up with some fairly unsatisfactory metrics and unsatisfactory goals that didn't include learning (I25).

As a result, most development resources on education were directed towards building schools and ensuring primary education for all. [cxxv,cxxvi,cxxvii] Several scholars attribute the narrow education MDG focus to poor learning outcomes in many LMICs, given the over-emphasis on access by national governments to the neglect of ensuring quality education and actual learning outcomes. [cxxviii, cxxix, cxxx, cxxxi, cxxxii, cxxxiii]

Yet in two ways the MDG's focus on access and gender equity helped spur attention to foundational learning. First, toward the end of the 2000s a growing number of actors in global education came to believe that the access agenda had been achieved, and that the learning agenda was the natural next step (I3, I7, I14, I20). As one education specialist observed:

> The last five years there's been a sea change, just night and day, and I think in part it was because everybody was done with the MDG mostly in a positive way. If you say we have this access agenda and then you meet it, then you've got to have a new agenda (I20).

Second, there was a counter-reaction to the MDG's focus on access. As 2015 approached, many in the global education community called for a shift in the dialogue dominated by the MDGs to one that returned to the spirit of the EFA goals, with a focus on access *plus* learning. [cxxxiv, cxxxv, cxxxvi, cxxxvii, cxxxviii, cxxxix, cxl, cxli] As one education proponent stated:

> The fear of going into any kind of post-2015 agenda without having metrics that would actually enable us to measure learning as opposed to just access was palpable (I15).

Another education proponent observed:

> I think that most in the education community have been criticizing [the access focus] from the outset of the Millennium Development Goals…the MDG process is partly what has led to a more global discomfort around the fact that we haven't been paying enough attention to learning (I6).

Opposition from teachers' unions and others (framework factor 5: allies and opponents)

Another factor that has shaped the trajectory of attention to foundational learning has been objections on the part of Education International (EI), a federation of about 400 teacher's associations and unions in more than 170 countries. An EI representative argues that foundational learning does not adequately consider the:

> …quality of teachers themselves because it's teachers who actually deliver education and interpret the curriculum, translate it into lesson plans and then interact with students. If the quality of teachers themselves is very low, it's unlikely that the quality of teaching is high, and of course high quality teaching translates to high quality learning (I21).

The same representative raises another concern about the strategy, pertaining to assessment:

> This idea of saying 'if you want to improve teaching and learning, let's assess and assess and assess.' No, it doesn't work that way. If you want to improve teaching and learning, your major concern should not be assessment actually. Your major concern should be improving teaching and learning, so supporting teachers, providing the resources, providing the right environment for effective teaching and learning.

One of the key voices in the post-2015 agenda discussions, EI took part in online consultations for the "World We Want" Initiative and its representatives attended several high-level global

thematic panel meetings. [cxlii, cxliii] EI advanced 10 principles for a post-2015 education and development framework, including ensuring "the level of quality of teachers as a key determiner for the level of quality of education that those teachers distribute" and "broader standards of evaluation in determining rates or levels of learning." [cxliv]

EI and other critics believe that teachers are often vilified and blamed for poor learning outcomes, when instead the focus should be on the important role they play and on engaging them in overcoming the learning crisis. [cxlv] These critics believe that unfair and disproportionate attention is paid to problems of ghost teachers and teacher absenteeism. [cxlvi] In addition, they argue that foundational learning proponents and initiatives like the LMTF focus excessively on measuring learning, to the neglect of improving learning. [cxlvii cxlviii] A respondent critical of the foundational learning agenda noted:

> I wouldn't call it the knee-jerk reaction, but the next thing [after a call for improving learning] that's usually talked about [among foundational learning proponents] is how to measure and quantify learning rather than think about it more broadly and kind of embedded within learning enabling context, or what sometimes people refer to as quality education (I32).

Some foundational learning proponents interpret EI's and other critics' objections differently, arguing that these are politically motivated, and are connected to preserving teachers' jobs and raising salaries (I15, I19, I25, I27):

> In Education International…there was a fear that teachers would be losers in any process to push for accountability on the basis of learning. EI to this day continues to be very reluctant—you even get some fairly strong statements coming out of Education International about this whole movement for early grade measurement being antithetical to children's rights and so on (I25).

For example, one foundational learning proponent expressed frustration with EI's objections to an early grade reading indicator during the negotiation process of the Framework for Action meeting:

> They mask [their fear of accountability] in a lot of stuff…In their comments [EI] said that they thought the learning indicator was violating the rights of the child; pretty dramatic language – commercialization, over-testing, abusive to children, this kind of thing (I27).

There are also major donors and institutions that do not explicitly embrace the learning agenda – let alone the foundational learning agenda – as an organizational focus. For example, the French Development Agency's recent strategy document *French External Action for Education in Developing Countries 2010‑2015* outlined two major goals, neither of which mention learning: 1) universal primary education and achieving equal access to education for boys and girls and 2)

an integrated vision of education through a new strategy encompassing the entire educational sector.[cxlix] The Japan Cooperation Agency 's (JICA) 2010 *Operation in Education Sector: Present and Future* position paper placed emphasis on supporting three goals: 1) expansion of access (through construction of primary and secondary schools); 2) improvement of the quality of education (via the training of science and mathematics teachers); and 3) improvement of school management.[cl]

Disagreements within the global education community (framework factor 4: framing strategies)

Another inhibiting factor shaping the trajectory of attention to foundational learning has been the lack of consensus within the global education community about the content and merits of the learning agenda, and strategies to advance learning. At least six basic disagreements persist. These concern: (1) the actual status of learning in the global education agenda—both historically and currently; (2) what constitutes learning; (3) if and how it should be measured; (4) where decision-making power should lie in shaping the global agenda; (5) which target group(s) of students should be prioritized; and (6) what strategies should be used to advance a learning agenda.

Agenda status of learning

Members of the global education community do not even agree on the basic question of the extent to which learning is prioritized in the global education agenda. They fall into three groups. A number of members understand learning never to have been neglected in any fundamental sense (I3, I4, I6, I7, I16, I18, I28). Others believe learning has been and continues to be neglected (I19, I20, I24, I27). Still others perceive that learning was neglected, but in the past several years has emerged as a prominent issue on the global education agenda (I1, I2, I5, I8, I14, I15, I25, I26).

These differing perceptions point to divergent interpretations of (1) the history of global education, (2) how learning is defined and what exactly it comprises, (3) how 'learning' or 'foundational learning' is to be measured, and (4) what evidence should be used to determine the global agenda status of the issue. Among the potential indicators and the evidence respondents

point to are: donor funding; priorities emphasized in major donor and international organization policy documents; discourse at major education conferences and forums; national government funding for education; public pronouncements of national leaders; implementation priorities of national governments; education goals included in major global agreements, particularly the EFA framework, the MDGs, and the SDGs; and indicators utilized by UNESCO and others to measure progress.

Those who argue that learning always has been a global priority point to the fact that quality and learning have been included in EFA aims and goals ever since the Jomtien meeting (I4, I6, I16). They argue also that learning is an integral part of education and thus always has been everybody's priority; after all, the main purpose of education and schooling is for the youth to learn (I6, I25, I28). One of the respondents' representative of this group states:

> …at the level of international policy, learning has been a fairly integral part of the international education policy discourse probably for 25 years. Mostly it was subsumed under the issue of quality education (I4).

Those who believe learning has been and continues to be neglected highlight the ongoing focus on inputs—including teacher support and training, and curriculum innovation—rather than learning as an outcome. They acknowledge attention to quality is a necessary condition for learning to take place, but argue that this is not the same as learning (I19, I20). In addition, they point to the lack of resources allocated by national governments and funders towards improving learning outcomes, and to minimal improvements in learning in LMIC settings (I19). One member of this group stated that he was:

> not convinced the agenda has really shifted to learning as opposed to it shifted to some combination of global rhetorical discourse about learning…in favor of a quality school agenda, which isn't a learning agenda in my mind (I20).

Another group understands learning to have been neglected historically but to have emerged as a priority in recent years. These individuals point to the major global education actors that over the past decade have included language around learning in their strategic documents and plans (I15). Some also point to the focus on learning in current SDG discussions, in contrast to MDG deliberations (I8, I12, I14, I15). An interviewee representative of this group stated:

> …quality education used to be talked about but I think for the first time now we are actually getting the signal that measurable learning outcomes are something that's going to be important (I26).

What constitutes learning?

A second major disagreement concerns what the learning agenda should encompass. While foundational learning proponents prioritize literacy and numeracy as fundamental to all other aspects of learning, others in the education community argue that this understanding is reductionist in nature, and advocate for a more encompassing agenda that includes literacy and numeracy but also incorporates learned behaviors, attitudes and other subject areas (e.g. fine arts, sciences, etc.) (I1, I5, I13-I16, I19, I21, I26). A respondent extensively involved in the UN High Panel discussions surrounding the education goal remarks:

> There's a big group that believes [that a certain understanding of learning] is reducing education down to just basic literacy and nothing more, and there's another group that says that without those basic learning outcomes, you just cannot move beyond…This is actually the basic fundamental level where that division is, and both groups claim to have strong commitment to education, and we are not moving forward (I26).

The differences in perspectives on this issue are reflected not only at the individual level, but also across organizations. For example, many respondents perceive UNESCO and EI to support a broad understanding of learning, and the World Bank, Pratham, OECD, USAID, the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) and German development agencies (GIZ and BMZ) to embrace an understanding of learning compatible with a foundational learning perspective, focused primarily on literacy and numeracy. As one education proponent who is in support of a broader understanding of learning points out:

> UNESCO of course, in my view, rightly has always insisted on these different aspects [of learning], so there's been a bit of a tension therefore between the UNESCO type view and we'll say the World Bank and USAID type view – not that the two are necessarily coordinating – as this focus on especially early reading has come in (I5).

Another area of disagreement surrounds the purpose of learning. Some in the global education community advance that learning should be for individual development or skill enhancement, while others stress the social, economic, or political impacts of learning (I32).

The value of measuring learning

A third set of disagreements concern whether global learning assessments are necessary, how they should be conducted, and what exactly they should measure. While the foundational learning community sees the value of global learning assessments that are comparable across countries and contexts, and particularly those that focus on numeracy and literacy, others in the

global education community believe that such assessments are unnecessary, especially in low-income settings, as they promote high-stakes testing and the commercialization of education (I4, I6, I16, I21, I24, I27). There are others who hold a more nuanced view, advocating for regional based assessments, or those who support embedding common items across different regional or national assessments to allow for comparison (I32). Those in the global education community that do not value large-scale learning assessments believe that they do little to influence teaching practices in ways that improve learning outcomes, even if they potentially raise awareness around learning levels in a country and catalyze political will toward education reform. Furthermore, education proponents in this group argue that the contributions of these assessments in countries with weak education systems are marginal without an accompanying strategy that addresses the need for timely information at the school-level.[cli]

In contrast, as an education proponent involved in PISA states, global assessments enable the education community to:

> …see how students of different backgrounds do differently in different parts of the world and different education systems. All of those things are actually seen as really valuable tools for policy and practice (I24).

Even among those who agree on the value of global learning assessments, there are disagreements around the types of instruments that should be used to measure certain sets of skills (i.e., curriculum-based assessments, competency-based assessments, etc.), their frequency, the type of methodology (i.e., top-down vs. bottom-up implementation; universal vs. country-determined benchmarks; etc.), who should conduct the assessment (and the extent to which efforts should be invested in building LMIC capacity to manage and use the results of such assessments), the language used for assessment (if it should be different from the language of instruction and who should determine this), where the assessment should take place (i.e., at school, home, in a community space, etc.), the age or education level of the child, the language used for assessment (if it should be different from the language of instruction and who should determine this), and the objective of the assessment (i.e. community action, accountability for national governments and/or individual teachers, etc.) (I14, I18, I28, I29).[clii]

In addition, there is disagreement within the education community about whether or if measured learning outcomes should be or can be standardized across the globe (I21, I24, I26). Finally, there are various perspectives on what aspects of learning should be measured at the global level (I7, I8, I24). [cliii] [cliv] For example, disagreements took place in the Framework for Action meeting about the inclusion of an early grade reading indicator (I27). Since it is easier to manipulate and track education inputs than it is outcomes, there is concern by some in the education community that there will be a temptation to focus on measuring inputs that should improve learning (i.e. number of teachers, books, quality of curricula, etc.) without measuring true learning outcomes. [clv]

Appropriate locus of decision-making power

A fourth debate concerns where decision-making power should lie in shaping the global education agenda, including foundational learning. There are concerns among some in the education community over the domination of experts and agencies from the Global North in shaping the post-2015 education goals, and the relative lack of voice from national and sub-national level actors originating from the Global South (I25, I26). [clvi, clvii] As one education proponent from a LMIC observed:

> From the developing world, there are not that many ground level voices that are rising to the top (I26).

One exception that multiple individuals from the education community point to is Pratham in India. As one respondent noted:

> By 2010, they were starting to become a big voice, representing the Global South…Initially, this was a little bit of an uncomfortable northern donor-driven dialogue (I25).

Furthermore, some within the education community are questioning the authority and legitimacy of some of the global actors who are pushing their own education agendas. For instance, in speaking about a prominent Northern NGO dedicated to the advancement of the learning agenda, one education specialist interjected:

> Who the heck are they? …[they did not] come through the international channels like UNESCO or the Global Partnership for Education or anything like that… [and they have] never really [been] seen as legitimate by most developing countries, at least government officials (I5).

Priority target groups

A fifth debate pertains to the extent to which the learning agenda should encompass a focus on a broader target group beyond students at the primary level—a focal point of the MDGs—to include early childhood and secondary education students, and adults (I8, I11, I15, I16, I19, I20). While the foundational learning community historically has focused primarily on children at the primary level, others in the education community advocate for an expanded target group, that includes early childhood, secondary, and/or adult education levels. One of the respondents observed how these differences in target group foci have manifested among institutions – and particularly two institutions that embody a foundational learning agenda:

> I would say AID [USAID] pretty explicitly is concentrating on primary and reading; math too at this point, but they are concentrating on primary. They said explicitly that they would not touch early childhood. That came out about 5 years ago. It was very specific. They do a little bit of secondary depending on the country. The World Bank, they know that they need to do primary so they're always in primary but the countries always want loan money for a secondary, so they're always under pressure to do more secondary (I11).

Some in the global education community believe that a focus on pre-primary learning is essential for the advancement of learning.[clviii, clix] They argue that empirical evidence supporting this point is convincing (I15). For example, good quality pre-primary education results in cost-savings and increased efficiency in primary education, as well as higher attendance, and lower repetition and drop-out rates among students. Furthermore, youth who participated in early childhood education typically demonstrate higher achievement scores than non-attenders and perform better in the PISA assessment at age 15 than youth who did not, after controlling for socioeconomic background.[clx, clxi] As one global education leader observed:

> [There is] increasing interest in early learning, particularly as it pertains to the learning agenda… when it comes to the education agenda and learning agenda, one of the one things that you can actually quote as being something that works is early learning. If you can get that right, you're going to have a relatively positive impact on future cognitive ability (I15).

Their efforts have gained traction. Unlike the education MDGs, the education SDG explicitly includes a pre-primary focus ("access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education") and embraces the notion of lifelong learning ("promote lifelong learning opportunities for all").[clxii] An education proponent critical of foundational learning proponents noted how the education SDG is incompatible with their agenda:

> The new agenda of education is about lifelong learning and the idea that there can be second chances and other opportunities for out of school youth and adults that never acquired literacy (I32).

Strategies to advance the agenda

The final debate pertains to what strategy(s) should be employed to advance the learning agenda. While there are some in the global education community who advance inputs or quality-based strategies (i.e., increasing teacher professional development opportunities, improving teacher-pupil ratios, improving curriculum and instructional quality), there are others—the core of the foundational learning community—who argue for strategies that are output and performance-based (i.e. assessing literacy and numeracy of children) (I23). Furthermore, among foundational learning proponents, there are disagreements that arise from organizational and philosophical differences. In an effort to advance the agenda, some focus on education systems development (strategies broadly associated with the World Bank, DFID, GPE). For example, the World Bank has directed its efforts on system assessment and bench-marking tools to assess the capacity of education systems to improve learning outcomes, as well as assessments of student learning and achievement that cover the foundational competencies of reading and numeracy.[clxiii] Others, in contrast, adopt an emphasis on achieving instructional outcomes in the classroom (strategies associated with USAID and the Hewlett Foundation). For example, USAID focuses on advancing the agenda through three types of interventions: 1) improving teacher effectiveness; 2) increasing availability and use of reading materials; and 3) strengthening classroom and school management.[clxiv]

Other strategy debates, more broadly, pertain to the value of mother-tongue based multilingual education in primary grades, the type of support needed to enhance early child development opportunities, the role and value of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the delivery of quality learning, teaching, and administration, and how to address and eliminate various types of access barriers (I32). Disagreements around strategy are further compounded by limited resources. As one education proponent observed:

> We simply don't have the financial or human or institutional resources to solve [the learning crisis] at the moment and there's very little consensus about what to do because none of the solutions are adequate, even remotely adequate (I11).

A foundational learning proponent admitted:

> If a minister or president of a country came to me and said, "We're your complete disciples, we'll do whatever you want, what is it concretely we should do?" I am not ready for that level of granularity, and I'm not ready with the politics. I don't know that there's a feasible politics that mobilizes up and down that five tier chain of elites to get the agenda adopted and implemented (I20).

Conclusion: the future of the foundational learning agenda

Foundational learning has acquired a central place on the global education agenda. It is a subject of considerable discussion at high-level forums, and of strategic emphasis by several core actors involved in the global governance of education. Three factors have facilitated attention to foundational learning, especially since the early 1990s: 1) mounting evidence of a global learning crisis, 2) emergent evidence on the tractability of the problem, and 3) entrepreneurship on the part of individuals and organizations. Three factors have inhibited attention to the foundational learning agenda: 1) the MDG focus on access to the neglect of learning, 2) reservations by a global teachers' union and others in the global education community, and 3) disagreements among the global education policy community on the merits of the agenda, and on strategies to advance learning. The issue's agenda status has been shaped by the actors involved, the policy contexts in which they operate, and characteristics of the learning crisis itself. Its future will also likely be shaped by factors in each of these three categories, some external to the foundational learning policy community, others internal to that community and more readily under the control of its members.

Among the external factors that will likely shape the agenda's future are two global initiatives with potentially large norm-setting power (framework factor 7: norms). One is the SDGs, which signal to nation-states which educational priorities to pursue. SDG 4 broadens the MDG's narrow focus on education access and gender parity to include targets embraced by foundational learning proponents. Specifically, it includes education quality and/or learning outcomes in half of the targets, with one target explicitly focused on literacy and numeracy. On the other hand, the SDGs expand the MDG's sole focus on primary education to emphasize lifelong learning, a broadening that may concern some foundational learning proponents. A second initiative is the International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity, which has convened leaders, researchers, and policy-makers to review the state of global education and develop an investment case and financing pathway for achieving equal educational opportunity. The Commission's report, due to be launched at the next UN General Assembly in New York in September 2016, will, like the SDGs, provide a signal to national governments on what should be emphasized in education, and may influence their priorities.

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A second external factor pertains to the power of critics, especially teachers' unions, that challenge the legitimacy of the agenda (framework factor 5: allies and opponents). These skeptics, including EI, argue that the foundational learning agenda focuses excessively on measurement to the neglect of teacher development and finding means of improving learning—critiques that proponents find misguided. Teachers' unions are frustrated by the fact that many in the education community blame instructors for poor learning outcomes. The future of foundational learning will likely be shaped by how teachers' unions come to understand the intent of their critics, and whether they perceive there to be synergies between their own goals and those of foundational learning proponents. Interestingly, foundational proponents diverge on the potential for synergy: some see possibilities for bridging gaps; others believe the differences are so great that any attempt at reconciliation will prove fruitless.

A final external factor concerns the extent to which civil society institutions in LMICs mobilize to press governments to act on learning (framework factor 5: allies and opponents). While there are a few positive cases (e.g. Pratham in India), grassroots demand for educational policy reform in support of learning has generally been weak in LMICs. Among the reasons may be that communities have little information on how well schools are doing in advancing learning, and that many constituencies of low socio-economic status have little political power to push for reform (and many other pressing concerns).

The above factors all pertain to the policy environment—features only partially under the control of members of the foundational learning policy community. Another set of factors likely to shape the agenda's trajectory are internal, and pertain to the way in which the community itself mobilizes to address the issue.

First is governance—the way the community organizes itself to pursue collective action (framework factor 2: governance). This is a particularly important consideration given that several of the key forums that were central to bringing together members of the foundational learning community in the lead-up to the post-2015 education agenda discussions no longer exist or are being phased out—including the Learning Metrics Task Force and the Hewlett Foundation's Advisory Panel. The future of foundational learning may depend on the extent to

which proponents come together to create an effective governing structure that can provide a forum for productive deliberation. The Global Alliance to Monitor Learning (GAL) is one of several emergent forums that may serve as an effective mechanism to facilitate interaction among this community.

Second is the perceived severity of the learning crisis (framework factor 4: framing strategies; framework factor 8: severity), which has been shaped by past difficulties in measuring learning, especially in comparison to more easily-measured goals such as school access and gender parity. Foundational learning's prospects will likely be shaped by the extent to which past efforts (such as that by the LMTF) and present initiatives (for instance the Global Alliance to Monitor Learning's efforts to develop instruments to monitor the education SDG targets, particularly literacy and numeracy), lead to harmonized and widely used indicators of quality learning that provide ongoing and convincing evidence of a global problem.

Third concerns the foundational learning community's ability to generate consensus and clarity on a set of core demands, and on an external positioning of the issue that resonates with political elites and funders (framework factor 4: framing strategies; framework factor 9: tractability). Members disagree on the status of learning in the global education agenda, on measures to be used to assess learning, and on strategies to advance foundational learning. As a result, it is not always clear to national political leaders what proponents are asking them to do. In particular, there is a need to clarify what constitutes an 'output-based' or 'performance-based' strategy— beyond an expectation that governments prioritize literacy and numeracy and that they measure it. All this pertains to the perceived tractability of the problem: the availability of cost-effective ways to improve primary-school level numeracy and literacy skills, and of strong empirical evidence demonstrating that a focus on these foundational areas is a gateway to improvement of a child's broader learning. Such evidence is accumulating via the work of organizations that embrace foundational learning, including Save the Children, Pratham, USAID, the World Bank and most recently, the Brookings Institution's Center for Universal Learning, which in 2016 published *Millions Learning: Scaling up Quality Education in Developing Countries*. Yet proponents diverge on the status of the evidence: some understand there to be clear solutions available and a potentially coherent set of demands; others argue that the knowledge-base is

weak, and that demands are unclear and fragmented.

Fourth concerns the composition of the coalition that has mobilized to advance foundational learning (framework factor 3: composition). Most of its members are technical experts. However, the issue touches on many politically sensitive subjects —including teacher accountability and national language policy—that require a broader coalition in order to gain traction. Research on global health[6] demonstrates that networks are most effective when they build broad-based political coalitions that include allies that extend well beyond the technical actors that first bring attention to an issue. This explains variance in global policy attention across similar issues, including tobacco control versus alcohol harm, maternal mortality versus newborn survival, and tuberculosis versus pneumonia. One strategic advantage the foundational learning policy community holds is the central involvement of actors from the Global South in the coalition, augmenting the legitimacy of the agenda (particularly the Pratham-initiated south-to-south spread of ASER-like surveys from India to Pakistan, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Mali, Senegal, Mexico, and Nigeria in a short period of time, and the formation of the People's Action for Learning (PAL) Network, a Global South coalition committed to assessing the basic reading and numeracy competencies of all children). The future of the agenda may depend heavily on whether such a political coalition—linking technical experts, civil society groups, national politicians, donors, UN agencies and others—can be forged, sustained and expanded.

These four internal factors—internal governance, consensus on core demands and positioning, tractability, and coalition composition—are more readily under the control of foundational learning policy community members than the external factors—global initiatives, organized opposition to the agenda, and civil society pressure on national governments. Yet even the latter three factors are partially shaped by the policy community itself. The foundational learning community potentially can influence the indicators selected to hold governments accountable, modes of engagement with teachers' unions, and evidence provided to civil society institutions and community groups that can be used to press governments to act. In sum, although not fully

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[6] Jeremy Shiffman, Hans Peter Schmitz, David Berlan et al. The Emergence and Effectiveness of Global Health Networks: Findings and Future Research. *Health Policy and Planning* 31 (Suppl 1): i110-i123.

in their control, the future of the foundational learning agenda will in part depend on how effectively core community members address the challenges they face pertaining to internal governance, problem definition, indicator development, public positioning, solution selection, engagement with opposition, coalition-building and civil society mobilization.

Appendix- Interview Questionnaire: Learning in the Global Education Agenda

Extent of Neglect: To what extent do you think the learning agenda is currently neglected? What empirical evidence supports your claim?

- Some of our interviewees have contended that MDG focus on access displaced emphasis on learning. to what extent would you agree with this?

1. Internal framing. What do you see as the most crucial global debates presently surrounding how to advance learning in low-income settings?

- How do you understand learning? How do you define quality?
- Probe: What does it encompass? Writing/reading/math skills? Numeracy vs. Literacy.
- Probe: Have differences in definition instigated active disagreement between the different networks and individuals involved?
  - o Probe: If yes: Is it or do you foresee it becoming a point of contention, if not resolved over time?

2. Motivation/Background. What has been your involvement in advancing this issue?

- **Personal:** What is your motivation for involvement in promoting learning within the global education agenda?
- **Organizational Affiliation**: How did your organization get started; what is its focus in education; how did it come to devoting resources in this strategic direction?

3. **Major Actors/History.** Who are the major actors (networks, organizations) involved in learning on the global learning agenda and within LMICs?

- Probe: Why/When/How did they get involved in advancing this agenda?
- Probe: What instigated their shift from their focus on promoting the X agenda to X agenda within education?

4. **Features of the Learning Epistemic Community.** To what extent is there a distinct community of individuals within the education community that are primarily interested in advancing the learning agenda?

- Probe: If it exists: When and how did it emerge? Did this community exist before the MDGs?
- Probe: If it exists: Can you describe the nature of this community? What types of professionals is it comprised of? How big is this community (relative to other education communities)? Where do they reside/work (HIC/LMIC representation)?
- Probe: If it exists: What is/are the commonalities that bind this community?

5. **Member Cohesion/Collaboration**. What is the extent of collaboration that exists among learning actors?

- Probe: Are there cross-collaborative projects, etc.?
- Probe: How do you communicate with your colleagues within the learning community and/or your organization? What is the quality and frequency of communication?

6. **Member Cohesion/Disagreements**. What is the extent of tensions or disagreements that exists among learning actors?

- How well is the policy community working on the learning agenda able to manage and transcend differences among themselves?
- Probe: What tensions or frustrations are experienced by members within X organization and/or the learning community?
- Probe: What barriers exist in consensus-building among X organization and/or learning community members?

- Probe: What factors have enhanced consensus-building among X organization and/or learning community members?

7. **Institutional/Individual Leadership.** What global guiding institutions exist or have the potential to emerge for leading and/or coordinating collective action to advance the learning agenda?
- Probe: Why? What factors make this actor(s) an effective guiding institution?
- Probe: How effective have these institutions been? How can they be made more effective?
- Probe: In your opinion, who should lead the cause?
- Probe: Are there any **prominent individuals** that come to mind as leading the cause to bring more attention to advancing learning goals in LMICs?

8. **External Framing.** How has the case for advancing the learning agenda been made to external audiences (funders, policy-makers, etc.)?
- Probe: To what extent has the case been effective or had impact? How convincing are the solutions the community has proposed, and how effectively has this community communicated these in order to attract political support?
- Probe: In your opinion, what must be done or is needed to communicate global learning as a political priority on the global education agenda (or in LMICs)?
- Opinion/Recommendation: What factor(s) serve as the largest barrier(s) to promoting the learning agenda?
- Opinion/Recommendation: What factor(s) serve as the biggest potential(s) to promoting the learning agenda?

9. **Governance/Opposition.** Which actors present the greatest opposition to the learning agenda? How well has the policy community addressed this opposition?
- Probe: When/how did this opposition emerge?

10. **Political Contexts.** Can you think of any significant events or developments that have helped to *draw attention* to the lack of learning in LMICs? Can you think of any events or developments that have *detracted attention away* from these efforts? Any missed opportunities?
- **MDGs**: Why did the MDGs emerge as they did? Why did the MDGs focus on access? To what extent was there effort to make learning part of MDGs?
- **EFA**: To what extent has this community taken advantage of political opportunities such as the Education for All (EFA) goals?
- **Post-MDGs**:

11. **Issue Characteristics.** What data is available around learning outcomes? What assessment tools/surveys are available for this area?
- Probe: What are the challenges around data collection for this area? Is there agreement on learning indicators?
- Probe: Given your understanding of the problem, how should money and resources be invested in global learning efforts?
- Probe: What about learning makes it challenging (i.e. more difficult than the access agenda) to advance? To what extent does the access agenda have an inherent political benefit?

Endnotes

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