

Why Students Aren't Learning What They Need for a Productive Life

PE 13

Bruce Ross-Larson

Contributors: Pablo González, Andrés Fernández, Gemma Morales, and Luis Villugrón (Chile); Hania Sobhy (Egypt); Asnake Kefale, Belay Hagos Hailu, and Alec Ian Gershberg (Ethiopia); Priyadarshani Singh (India); Andrew Rosser, Phil King, and Danang Widoyoko (Indonesia); Laban P. Ayiro, Samuel Muriithi, Josephine Munyao, Lydia Radoli, and Martin Munyao (Kenya); Dozie Okoye and Leonard Wantchekon (Nigeria); Soufia A Siddiqi and Nasir Ali (Pakistan); Maria Balarin (Peru); Ken Ochieng' Opalo (Tanzania); and Jonathan D. London and Duong Bich Hang (Vietnam)

Abstract

The RISE program is a seven-year research effort that seeks to understand what features make education systems coherent and effective in their context and how the complex dynamics within a system allow policies to be successful. RISE had research teams in seven countries: Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Tanzania, and Vietnam. It also commissioned research by education specialists in Chile, Egypt, Kenya, Peru, and South Africa.

Those researchers tested ideas about how the determinants of learning lie more in the realm of politics and particularly in the interests of elites. They focused on how the political conditions have (or have not) put learning at the center of education systems (mostly not) while understanding the challenges of doing so. Each country team produced a detailed study pursuing answers to two central research questions: Did the country prioritize learning over access, and if so, during what periods? What role did politics play in the key decisions and how?

The full studies detail their analytical frameworks, their data, and sources (generally interviews, government internal documents and reports, and other local and international publications), and the power of their assessments, given their caveats and limitations. Country summaries extract from the full studies how leadership, governance, teaching, and societal engagement are pertinent to student outcomes.

This synthesis, in line with Levy 2022, draws on the country summaries to detail the salience of goals of national leaders, alliances of stakeholders, missions of education bureaucracies, and expectations of society.

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Bruce Ross-Larson
Communications Development Inc.

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Digitalizing, deskilling, and Edu 2.0

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Soufia A Siddiqi, with Nasir Ali

Unsettled and discontinuous

The politics of education reform in Peru

Maria Balarin

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The politics of improving learning outcomes in South Africa

Bruce Ross-Larson and Shazmeneh Durrani

Rationing learning

The politics of denying access to secondary schooling in Tanzania

Ken Ochieng' Opalo

Embedded accountabilities

The politics of learning in Vietnam

Jonathan D. London and Duong Bich Hang

Contents

Why students aren't learning what they need for a productive life.....	1
Goals of leaders.....	2
Education for self-reliance in Tanzania	3
Policy shifts between state and market in Chile	4
Education embedded in Vietnam's party-state	7
Alliances of stakeholders	8
Persistent predation in Indonesia	8
Disconnected reformers and implementers in India	10
Unsettled and discontinuous reform efforts in Peru	12
Ambitious plans and poor outcomes in Ethiopia	13
Missions of education bureaucracies.....	14
Contested identities and competing accountabilities in Pakistan	15
Technocratic policymaking hindering fundamental changes in Peru	16
Clear intentions but competing priorities in South Africa	17
Teachers driven by their professional ethos in Vietnam	18
Deprofessionalized teaching in Ethiopia	19
Expectations of societies.....	20
All for learning in Vietnam	20
Curriculum reform in Indonesia	21
Moving to a competency-based curriculum in Kenya.....	23
So... ..	24
Annex 1 The 5x4 RISE Education Systems Framework.....	25
Annex 2 Indicators of learning for RISE countries.....	26
Notes	27
References	29

Why students aren't learning what they need for a productive life

Most students in developing countries aren't learning much. They may be attending school, and they may be taking tests, but just over half of students in low and middle income countries could not read and understand a simple passage about everyday life by the end of primary school in 2020.¹ And Covid may have pushed that to 70 percent, leaving them alarmingly unready for secondary school. It also leaves them alarmingly below their potential for living a productive life. In Pakistan, for example, girls have a human capital index of 0.08, which means that they can expect to reach only 8 percent of their potential human capital by age 18 if they were in better health and had 14 years of quality education.²

The poor learning results are not just low but are not getting better (and in many countries they are getting demonstrably worse). One stance toward slow progress in learning is "patience." But when trends are going in the wrong direction, patience is not a virtue. Many countries' education systems are caught at best in a stagnation trap and at worst in a downward spiral. These low learning outcomes are not the inevitable consequence of being a poor country, countering the reaction: "Sure learning outcomes are low, they are a poor country." Vietnam is proving (as Korea, Japan, and others did in earlier decades) that one can have OECD-level learning outcomes even at very low GDPs per capita. It's easy to say that students are not consistently exposed to effective teaching and learning practices, a superficial domain of proximate determinants where technocrats love to focus.³

So why aren't students learning? They aren't learning:

- Because national leaders have other goals that override their intentions for education: obedient citizens, stable polities, ideological conformists.
- Because the interests of education's stakeholders are misaligned: parents are for passing tests, teachers for higher pay, administrators for more and more qualified teachers, technocrats for more research, businesses for more talented workers, finance ministries for smaller budget allocations and greater efficiency.
- Because education bureaucracies are top-down: oppressing and suppressing district and school administrators, inflicting curricula that teachers are ill-equipped to deliver or too occupied performing tasks unrelated to instruction or staying away from classrooms to tutor their students and supplement their meager income.
- And because societies have low or no expectations about what schools might impart to students: rote memorization of possible answers to questions likely to be asked on tests, and certainly not skills to succeed in life.

These four deficiencies are the entry points that Brian Levy identifies for finding good fits in various contexts to improve learning outcomes, after assessing the RISE country studies (box 1).⁴

- Shifting the goals of national leaders toward education that is oriented to learning.
- Nurturing alliances of stakeholders to push back against clientelist pressures and work collectively to meet leadership's goals for learning.

- Solidifying the missions of education bureaucracies to move beyond top-down oversight by empowering all in the system to doggedly pursue the quality of learning and to expand islands of excellence into archipelagos.
- Boosting the expectations of society about the learning their education systems might deliver.

This synthesis follows the same structure of leaders, alliances, missions, and expectations to detail the pathologies and occasional bright spots of their education systems.

Box 1 Classifying political and institutional contexts

Brian Levy, in reviewing the RISE country studies, identifies three political-institutional contexts for the ways that power and politics influence policymaking and policy implementation in education. One context is termed *dominant*, with power centered around a strong political leader and hierarchical governance cascading through to an education ministry and down to districts and schools. A second is termed *impersonal competition*, where power is distributed among several stakeholders who resolve conflicts through impersonal rules and mechanisms that are monitored and enforced impartially. The third is termed *personal competition*, where power is again distributed among several stakeholders but they resolve conflicts through personal deals that are self-enforcing.

- Education systems in dominant contexts include Ethiopia, Indonesia, Tanzania, and Vietnam. Only in Vietnam does leadership provide a platform for improving learning outcomes. The other four show how the goals of leaders can depart wildly in other directions.
- Systems in impersonal contexts, with fairly high rule of law and low clientelism, include Chile, India, Peru, and South Africa. Only in Peru, with its messy politics, did learning outcomes markedly improve. In the other three, political contests left unresolved and formal institutions assiduously complying with rules fell short of having powerful interests improve learning outcomes.
- Systems in personal contexts, with fairly low rule of law and high clientelism, include Bangladesh, Nigeria, and Kenya. They lack the seeming strengths of the first two contexts, with multiple influential groups lacking a credible framework of rules to align their systems with learning. In Kenya, however, a broad-based commitment to all for education, with communities demanding better performance from teachers, seems to have overcome these deficiencies and delivered outsized improvements in test scores, second only to Mauritius in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Levy then explores the causal mechanisms that link each context to learning outcomes, focusing on specific governance processes and on the entire governance system. On the link between political processes and policymaking, the key relationship is between political leaders and top education technocrats. On policymaking, the key relationships are between policymakers in the education bureaucracy and technical professionals outside the bureaucracy as well as other national stakeholders. And on implementation all the way down to schools, the key relationships are between education administrators from the center down to principals, parents, communities, and local power brokers.

Source: Adapted from Levy 2022.

Goals of leaders

The goals of national leaders for education would ideally be the platform for improving learning outcomes, as in Vietnam. But in country after country, that is far from the case, as with rent-seeking in Indonesia and Nigeria and rote memorization for tests in India. And even where

improving the quality of education is the explicit goal, as in Chile after its return to democracy, tussles among factions thwarted reforms. As Levy notes, "Insofar as other goals are prioritized, improvements in learning will be hard to achieve."⁵

Education for self-reliance in Tanzania

The first years of independence after 1961 were marked by the total dominance of the ruling party, the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU), under the leadership of Julius Nyerere. TANU elites initially sought to advance a rapid development agenda (through modernization) while mobilizing popular support for it. The predominant objectives of the education system included limited skill development for Africanizing the state bureaucracy, deracializing schools and the curriculum, and nation-building through the promotion of Swahili as the language of instruction in primary schools.

The official objectives of schooling and the state's administrative capacity determined the extent to which the education system delivered on learning outcomes. Functional literacy was important, but only to the extent that it provided pupils with the means of learning how to increase their agricultural productivity. Usefulness to the local community, and not learning as a ladder to higher education, was the goal.

By the mid-1960s, it was clear that the policy of modernization for development was not working. And following the Arusha Declaration pronouncing Tanzania as a socialist state in 1967, it became necessary to re-orient the education system to meet the government's new goals. It was under these circumstances that Nyerere announced the Education for Self-Reliance (ESR) policy in 1967, with two key educational tenets. Both primary and secondary school were to be terminal tiers of education, and not viewed as preparation for higher education. And schools were to become self-sufficient and embedded in their host communities, with students spending considerable amounts of time developing practical vocational skills for rural development (especially in agriculture). The emphasis on agriculture and the dim prospects of advancing beyond primary school created strong disincentives against investing in academic learning outcomes.

ESR had explicit political objectives. Through the use of Swahili as the language of instruction and general political education, Tanzania was to avoid subnational centrifugal challenges and create loyal and self-sufficient citizens. Similarly, the emphasis on agriculture was a direct admission that the urban sector was not generating enough non-agricultural wage jobs. To have a firm control over the implementation of ESR, all schools were nationalized in 1969.

As with the earlier modernization policy, the government struggled with implementation. Its policy directives were typically general, leaving a lot of discretion to subnational authorities. Until 1972, local governments were in charge of the basic education system, had elected officials, and could raise their own revenue through taxation.⁶ They could thus subvert the top-down policy directives or innovate during implementation. This created the distinct possibility of reproducing existing subnational disparities in educational and economic outcomes. To avoid this, the government abolished the local government system and replaced it with regional administrations. The goal was to rationalize the allocation of scarce resources for development

and to have the regions (instead of smaller sub-regional units) better coordinate the implementation of national government policies, including ESR.⁷

By the mid-1970s, popular pressure forced a re-think of the key planks of ESR. Following a meeting in Musoma, TANU issued the “Musoma Resolutions,” which were meant to strengthen the implementation of ESR. They included a call for universal primary education (UPE), a de-emphasis of examinations as a means of evaluating students, a call for work-oriented education with emphasis on practical skills, and the need for A-level graduates to perform one year of national service, be gainfully employed for a number of years, and get recommendation letters from TANU before admission to university.⁸ Primary school enrollments increased considerably after 1974 before plateauing in the early 1980s. Crucially, the policies of rationing secondary schooling and maintaining primary school as a terminal tier of education remained in place. So, the rate of transition to secondary school plummeted between 1970 and 1985.

Nyerere was candid about the rationing of education access beyond the primary level:

“Primary School education is indeed what we mean by education in Tanzania. Post-primary education is that which will prepare a few qualified individuals for those special kinds of service which need more training. It cannot be more than that while our National Income per head is so low.”⁹

This was not cheap talk. Access to secondary education was restricted across the board regardless of class status—a fact that continues to affect the lives of Tanzanian adults.

Economic crises in 1980s forced the government to reconsider its commitment to UPE and ongoing expansion of access to education. The result was a stagnation of UPE gains, as the government introduced fees. The economic crises of the 1980s created an opportunity to reevaluate the goals of education. In the process, political elites settled on a new view of education: it should be universal, of higher quality, have greater academic (as opposed to practical) content, and be open up to the highest level. Multiparty politics, even though TANU retained national power, added strength to this emerging consensus with stunning results. After four decades of rationing access to secondary education, the government committed itself in 2005 to universal secondary education and within a decade built thousands of schools, more than quintupled enrollment, and increased the rate of transition from primary to secondary school from less than 20 percent to almost 80 percent.

But on education attainment (secondary education or higher) by income quintile, Tanzania lags well behind both Kenya and Uganda. For example, the share of Kenyans in the bottom quintile with a secondary education is higher than that of Tanzanians in the top quintile, presumably an outcome of the endurance of Tanzania’s early postcolonial history of rationing access to secondary and higher education.

Policy shifts between state and market in Chile

For 17 years starting in 1973, Chile was ruled by a military dictatorship under Augusto Pinochet—after 143 years of almost uninterrupted liberal democracy. In 1981, a large-scale reform of the social sectors—including health, education, and pensions—was prepared by the “Chicago Boys”—following Milton Friedman’s neoliberal teachings.¹⁰ The financial and administrative

reforms for education included competition, decentralization, and privatization, transferring public education to municipalities, and introducing a voucher system so that private subsidized schools and municipal schools could compete.¹¹

Since the return to democracy in 1990, Chile has built a consensus around the objective of educational quality and pursued it systematically, if incrementally. The Concertación, a center-left coalition of parties, privileged education and health, opposed by a right wing and its agenda favoring lower taxes and direct cash transfers to the poor. The Concertación's economic policies were very much in line with the Washington consensus and mainstream thinking in international financial organizations, combining fiscal balance with a mix of social policies targeted to the poor as well as more spending on human capital. The lack of resources in 1990 led to a strategy to control social demands and deter participation.¹² This led, until the mid-2000s, to policymaking by experts and was extremely top-down. An additional fear at the beginning of the period was the possibility of a military backlash, since Pinochet remained chief of the army.

Two positions within the Concertación expressed themselves in the education sector, one favoring better regulation of the market, and the other valuing public education at the symbolic level but without a clear proposal for how to improve it. Both emphasized equity but disagreed on the extent of concessions to exchange for efficiency. An example of this is the "shared financing" reform, which allowed publicly funded schools to charge a fee to families to "better fund" their education.¹³ The reform accepted jeopardizing equity in exchange for more private resources in education, allowing better targeting of fiscal resources as the value of the voucher was reduced along with the fees charged to parents. This reform was supported by the right-wing coalition, which favored strengthening freedom of choice by parents and providing more resources to private voucher schools, a concession in exchange for right-wing representatives approving a tax increase in 1993.

The "private sector" has two sets of schools—ones that get subsidized and ones that opt out of getting any subsidy as they don't want the government regulation (like the initial ban on additional "top up" fees) that came with it. So 10 to 15 percent of kids go to unsubsidized private schools that don't get "vouchers" or etc. This means children of "the elite" for the most part don't really have a direct stake in the voucher system. Their kids go to the elite schools that opted out of vouchers. This makes the "right wing" lack of huge concern over education budgets but in support of lower taxes more understandable.¹⁴

Most observers see the "voucher" system as a neoliberal vision of "markets" and "competition" but I think this was part, but only part, of the key coalition. A key to the vouchers to private schools is that the teacher's unions in Chile (as in many other LAC countries) have been hot-beds of old school, hard-line Communists (in many LAC countries the main split in teachers unions is between the Marxist-Leninist and the Maoist visions of Communism). And in the old-school days (1980s) the Catholic Church hated Communism because it was avowedly communist. The only way to avoid hard-line left-wing control of the socialization features of education was to get kids out of public schools and into Catholic schools. And that is exactly what the "voucher" did: it isn't a voucher, it is "money follows the student" and thus only "voucher-like." So the system was half "neoliberal" and half "early culture wars." The "market" versus "state" may make for a clean storyline, but a battle for control of ideological socialization has also been at play, and on that

front "vouchers" have been a roaring success (and attempts to claw back state control will not be fought over efficiency or learning but over Catholics not wanting Marxists teaching their kids).

An elite/expert consensus on educational quality was established in the early 1990s and was more precisely elaborated at different key junctures in the form of "representative" "expert" commissions appointed by the executive branch to produce proposals on particular issues, starting with the Brunner commission. The consensus was built initially on the need to improve educational quality, given what other more developed nations were doing and achieving. Equity was always mentioned along with quality, and was expressed in targeted programs and then in a means-tested voucher. The turning point in prioritizing learning occurred during the Frei administration (1994–2000) and is associated with the turn to a single shift school day.

During the 1990s, the focus was on schools not classrooms. The "movement to the classroom" was limited to providing learning guides to supporting student learning. It continued in the early 2000s with teachers' development plans, the framework for good teaching, and teachers' evaluations. More recently, visits by the Quality Agency enter the school and the classroom to provide recommendations to improve teaching and students' outcomes. The movement was associated with the focus on measuring outcomes and making schools accountable for their performance rather than reaching the classroom through support systems on the basis of systems engineering and public value approaches.¹⁵

Over the years, there have been high hopes that a new public management/neoclassical economics recipe combining compacts and choice options would improve results. That recipe includes reporting test scores at school level and carrot and sticks (various programs of individual teacher evaluation with incentives, and a collective incentive pay program. It is coupled with boosting inputs—teacher wages, textbooks, computers, internet, and a full school day. But results did not improve.

The expanded center-left coalition presents the completion of market regulation and its extension to higher education as a major structural reform. It fostered school choice by reducing the possibility of selection by schools and correcting for differences in costs of provision. But a more radical sector, linked to social movements, suggests that the reform solution is simply to expand the state and dismantle the market. Some evidence of the negative effects of the institutional architecture of the education system provides ammunition to these groups.

The key features of this project were vindicated, especially those related to learning as educational policy and whole-of-government objective. The advancement of a teachers' career based on evaluation and a quality assurance system for schools, both with consequences, took time to be enacted into legislation but were virtually unopposed because of the lack of sound technical alternatives designed for a similar purpose.

The key political actors have been two coalitions. The right, aligned with the model inherited from the dictatorship, is more inspired by unregulated markets and school autonomy. The center-left coalition has moved to the left through time, with two souls, one to regulate markets, mainly economists and engineers, and the other to replace it. "Experts" have exerted a deep influence on the legislation, more in line with neoclassical economics and New Public Management. This has produced a curious combination of "double" accountability, with markets and consumers

vindicated by the right, and regulation and sanctions promoted by the self-complacent left, resulting in measures such as the features just mentioned, with the right accepting them while preferring less intrusion.

Recently, with the eruption of social movements and a more radical left, with more representatives in the newly elected 2021 Constitutional Assembly, the possibility of reversing institutional changes is real. Examples include the new demands of the Teachers Union to replace universal student assessment and change the evaluation system.

Overall, the good intentions to improve educational quality, resources, and carrots and sticks have not been enough to move the Chilean educational system. It might well be that educational change takes time. If a teachers' career path will attract better candidates, its effects on student learning will take at least a generation. But the top-down character of Chilean educational policymaking and the insufficient use of institutional voice mechanisms might backfire. Mounting social tensions suggest that a consensus needs to be built beyond political and economic elites to endure, especially when countries achieve a certain development threshold.¹⁶

Education embedded in Vietnam's party-state

In Vietnam, the Communist Party's commitment to education—visible both at the level of elite politics *and* in the routine processes and compliance procedures of its sprawling party-state—has prioritized education over several decades across all levels of public administration. And patterns of societal engagement—visible in public and private investments in education and in a surprisingly active education-specific public sphere—have given the education system considerable attention. These features have produced institutionalized levels of accountability to education policy goals that exceed that seen in other countries.

Education policy in Vietnam has been associated with state building, nation building, patriotism and, not least, the relentless emphasis of the Party's subjective legitimacy. Indeed, the education system is deeply embedded in the sprawling party-state and in the production of socialist consciousness. Most school principals and leading teachers in any school are members of the Party, as are leading figures in the education bureaucracy—from commune-level cadres responsible for social affairs up through the district-level bureaus of education, the province-level departments of education, up to the ministry of education in Hanoi.

Party-led organizations extend throughout the education system, involving students in ideological training from kindergarten through to the PhD and beyond. The Party has placed education at the center of its political agenda over the past three decades—and backed this commitment with substantial resources and energy. And through its fiscal policies, the central state redistributed resources to poorer regions more than other developing countries have. This permitted rapid expansions in enrollment and in average years of schooling nationwide and narrowed enrollment gaps in enrollment across regions and between urban and rural zones.

An additional indication of political commitment and a likely contributor to Vietnam's performance has been that, while private spending on education continues to grow, the Party has itself maintained high levels of public support for education, approaching 5.7 percent (in 2017) of an expanding GDP, compared with 3.6 for Indonesia (2015) and 2.6 for the Philippines (in 2012). Annually, education spending accounts (by formal requirement) for 20 percent of

Vietnam's state budget. Although how much of this amount is actually spent and how effectively are often not revealed or made explicit even to high-ranking policy planners.

With this drive, Vietnam has registered explosive growth in enrollments at all levels of education, achieving near universal primary and lower-secondary enrollment (by state accounts), including a doubling of net lower-secondary enrollment and a tripling of upper-secondary enrollment between 1992 and 2006.¹⁷ Between 1992 and 2014, the country registered an extraordinary nearly three-year increase in average years of schooling. Vietnam's performance on international assessments of learning surpasses that of all countries in its income group and approaches that of many high-income countries, in math, reading, and science. Vietnam has also made great strides in making education more accessible to all citizens, in part owing to continued fiscal prioritization of education, including large-scale transfers from richer to poorer provinces that have permitted enrollment gains across the country.

Still, not all may be as well as it seems. Given the success and the image of the Communist party as "top down." It is easy to believe that Vietnam was top-down leadership with good bureaucratic implementation. But that's not the full story. Another view is a combination of a top-down drive for success with super empowered and super messy local struggles in which the party apparatus could be mobilized at the local level against the bureaucracy of the schooling system. So local accountability was real. To some acute observers, Vietnam was at least as corrupt as Pakistan--but in Vietnam you got what you paid for. The fact that, for much of this period, the education system was underfunded relative to the goals meant that local "donations" were needed (say, to top up teacher incomes) and that gave people leverage in demanding performance, making Vietnam a complex story of messy "good struggles" as much as "top down" implementation.¹⁸

Alliances of stakeholders

With the goals of leaders for education failing to cascade down to stakeholders at different levels or even inimical to learning, it is easy to see why "contestation among stakeholders leads to both policy incoherence and bureaucratic fragmentation—leaving public resources especially vulnerable to predation."¹⁹ Indeed, the alliances in Indonesia seem to plunder education at the expense of learning, or even teaching. In India, even though reform ideas have surprising continuity and repetition, with the range of ideas having remained largely the same since 1975, there is a disconnect between actors involved in initiating reform and those implementing it. In Peru, private interests have frequently jeopardized the advance toward key goals through their impact on ministerial crises that have led to sweeping changes of key policy teams. And in Ethiopia, while some stakeholders have a strong influence on the policies and strategies adopted, others have little or even no influence on policy processes.

Persistent predation in Indonesia

Indonesia's learning crisis has reflected the political dominance of predatory political, bureaucratic, and corporate elites. Senior state officials at the national and local levels have used their positions to accumulate wealth and the corporate elites to whom they are connected through family and other personal linkages. They have permeated the state apparatus at both the national and local levels. They have emerged out of a variety of institutions including the military, the police, the bureaucracy, the major political parties, and, increasingly in recent

decades, the country's major business conglomerates. And they have dominated the key arms of government—the legislature, the bureaucracy, and the judiciary.²⁰

Rather than produce skilled workers and critical and inquiring minds, these elites have sought to use the country's education system to accumulate resources, distribute patronage, mobilize political support, and exercise political control. They have pursued three distinct agendas relevant for education policy and its implementation: rent-seeking, promoting loyalty to the state, and fostering national development. They have had little concern with improving learning outcomes in terms of the acquisition of basic skills in mathematics, science, and literacy. Indeed, by reducing resources to education, misallocating these resources to corrupt purposes, and deflecting effort from serious study of basic curricula toward other activities—they have worked directly against such learning.²¹

For the education sector, this set of actors has included senior figures in the national parliament's education and budget committees, various senior officials in the Ministry of Education and Culture and Ministry of Religious Affairs, their counterparts in local parliaments and agencies. It also includes business groups with strong bureaucratic and political connections to these individuals and the Indonesian Teachers Union (which, despite its name and common description as a trade union, is an instrument of the education bureaucracy rather than a trade union). And it includes NGOs that have strong political or bureaucratic connections and which are established to access government funds without necessarily providing anything in return. Such NGOs are often referred to as "red license plate NGOs," a reference to the color of license plates on government vehicles.²²

Religious elites, some of whom have supported improved acquisition of basic skills in math, science, and literacy in line with Islamic traditions of learning have been co-opted, harnessing them to predatory agendas and disabling them as a significant force for change. Parents and schoolchildren—the principal users/clients of education systems—have been at best a minor player in contests over education policy and its implementation in Indonesia.

Technocratic and progressive elements, which have supported a stronger focus on basic skills acquisition, have contested this orientation, with occasional success, but generally contestation has been settled in favor of predatory elites. Accordingly, efforts to improve learning outcomes in Indonesia are unlikely to produce significant results unless there is a fundamental reconfiguration of power relations between these elements.

What, then, are the implications for efforts to promote improved learning outcomes in Indonesia? Such efforts are unlikely to produce significant results unless there is a fundamental reconfiguration of the political settlement that has characterized the country's political economy since the mid-1960s. Specifically, there needs to be a marked shift in the balance of power between predatory elites and technocratic and progressive elements in favor of the latter. Without such a shift, moves to increase funding, address human resource deficits, eliminate perverse incentive structures, and improve education management in accordance with technocratic templates of international best practice or progressive notions of equity and social justice—the sorts of measures that have been the focus of education reform efforts in Indonesia so far—are unlikely to produce the intended results.

The best prospects for a shift probably lie in intensifying the structural imperatives for Indonesia to improve its education system that have emerged as the knowledge and technology sectors have become an increasingly important source of global economic growth. At this point, however, there is little sign that such structural imperatives have translated into greater support for change among elites. Even so, there probably is some value in having proponents of improved learning outcomes in Indonesia engage more substantially with actors in the business community, which has the political clout to promote change in education policy and its implementation—especially vis-à-vis learning. And recent years have seen significant growth in creative industries’ such as information technology, software development, media, and film.

Disconnected reformers and implementers in India

Reform ideas in India have surprising continuity and repetition, with the range of ideas having remained largely the same since 1975. But there is a disconnect between actors involved in initiating reform and those implementing it. The federal structure, with both the center and the state involved in delivering education, relegates implementation primarily to the states. Neither the institutional processes to include the states nor the culture of reform generation and policymaking have been able to overcome this divide. Reform thinkers and reform doers operate in different orbits. India is long on commissions and, in a sense, education has not really been forgotten. But the disjuncture between reform ideas and implementation has not been bridged.

Consensus around reform objectives and the key ideas for quality, learning, and governance has thus been lacking. Important actors are missing from the reform settlement process, and the ideas emerge from a narrow set of actors and from foreign donors. The failings of reform implementation do not generate a constituency either for better implementation or for new ideas. Different actors attempt to influence different bodies within the national and the state governments to implement their ideas, and conflicting ideas and approaches remain in fray. So, the reform system lacks coherence and focus.

The administrative structure at the state level and below has not been designed around reform. New ideas are outfitted on old structures with small tweaks made occasionally to align it with the overall system. This perhaps is the strongest indicator of the weak political engagement and commitment to implement reforms. Administrative architectures at the state level require significant political support to be realigned. But neither in the reform design nor in the process of developing the reform ideas have the structural foundations been laid out. The case of decentralization is instructive. Local administrative bodies (the panchayats) were increasingly involved in implementing new reform ideas, but they were not supported with finance, personnel, and training. This greatly curtailed their capacity to implement reforms.

Take elementary education reform. Defined by a narrow national elite, the reform is itself tenuous, with multiple conflicting ideas co-existing both within the policy space and implementation. Ideas become dominant not because there is a settlement between opposing groups through co-option or consensus. It is merely that one set of actors is able to capture some policy and implementation space. To do this, actors have used a range of methods, such as engaging with the political leadership, participating in national government constituted committees, and involving civil society players with overlapping ideas. Some ideas were side-

lined, sometimes only temporarily, such as contract teachers. Others remain unimplemented despite having some support among a section of key actors, such as continuous and comprehensive evaluation of both scholastic and nonscholastic attributes throughout the year through a range of assessments techniques, rather than just annual exam.

Most reform ideas have surprisingly long roots and gestation periods. And within the same category of actors, the support for the same ideas oscillates to varying degrees. While many civil society actors believe that learning outcomes should be defined, their support oscillates from measuring learning outcomes to linking it with teacher performance goals. Some ideas are acceptable but unimplementable, such as having a single school system. Others are implementable but deeply discomforting—such as examinations in elementary grades to ensure that the school system remains accountable and streamlined.

The national political leadership has largely played a ‘supporting’ role. Trusted members of the bureaucracy were given the space to think about, design, and implement the reform initiatives. The political leadership was not behind the reform or playing the lead in its development.

Actors involved in forming ideas such as district-based planning, community monitoring, and learning outcomes and their measurements, have been bureaucrats, educationists, academics, and civil society leaders at the national level with occasional inputs from the judiciary. The broad categories of actors have remained the same, but the nature of organizations and individuals within these categories have changed over the decades. Reform debates on formal versus non-formal education, common school versus segregated school system, learning outcomes focus versus input focus during these years unfolded with this cohort of reform actors.

In the government, the Department of Education, headed by the Education Secretary, and the Ministry of Human Resource Development have been key actors. Other government bodies engaged included the planning commission in which leading academics, researchers and civil society leaders were represented. Also closely involved in reform ideas were The National Council of Educational Research and Training, which looks at curriculum development, and the National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration, which leads training and capacity development among teachers and administrators.

The national bureaucracy has remained at the heart of reform across the decades while the role of state and below-state actors has been marginal. The Indian polity is a federal one, and school education is part of the concurrent list of the Indian constitution. Both national and state governments can legislate on it, but the delivery of school education is by the states. That is, the states set up and manage the schools, hire the teachers and school staff, conduct exams, and monitor infrastructure.

State secretaries of department of education and heads of training institutions participate in national committees such as the state education minister’s conference or the specialist committee constituted by the government such as the Bordia committee at the invitation of the national government. Other actors from the frontline bureaucracy are rarely involved in reform initiation or in ideas. States rarely have their own policy on education reform, and the role of most state organizations—such as textbook boards and state exam boards, state public service commissions, teacher recruitment boards, and state-level Panchayati raj departments—is largely

absent. The engagement of other state and national actors, such as teachers' unions or private school associations, remains peripheral, episodic, and reactionary, largely limited to issues pertaining to their specific area of focus. The dual structure at the state level—with the national reform project administered through an institutional set-up separate from the state education bureaucracy—reduces the political ownership, policy visioning, and implementation capacity of the states.

Unsettled and discontinuous reform efforts in Peru

Learning assessment, of the standardized variety, has been one of the most consistent areas of policymaking. But learning has been conceptualized merely as results in rather narrow standardized tests that assess knowledge and skills in just two curricular areas. And the way assessment results have been used to guide policy decisions, especially after 2006—may have been counter to the goal of actually improving teaching practices and learning. On one hand, there is evidence that teachers are teaching to the test and often narrowing down the curriculum. On the other, policymakers—especially those in the strategic planning and budget allocation offices of the Ministry of Education and their counterparts in the Ministry of Finance—search for recipes to improve results in the short term, but often sideline programs that might contribute to more long-lasting transformations of teaching and learning practices.

Throughout the period, an array of key actors has influenced formulating reforms. International agencies, especially the World Bank, and the InterAmerican Development Bank, have played a key role in setting and developing reform agendas. This influence, more a form of imposition, seems to have resulted from the poor capacity at the national level to establish and support the development of reform agendas. Along the way, the professional capacity of local actors has also developed, and the policy agendas—for instance, through the work of the National Council for Education, but also through the stronger capacity of the MoE teams—have become stronger and less reflective of international agencies' priorities. One line of thought, however, which has become profoundly entrenched in education policymakers' views, and which is traceable to the agendas of international agencies, is making standardized assessments the main guiding element for reforms, and of assuming that results in such tests are the sole and sufficient measure of quality.

Civil society organizations—NGOs, universities, think tanks, and research centers—have also played a key role in defining policy agendas, from the early General Diagnosis of 1993, to the national consultation for education and the drafting of the 2004 General Law of Education, up to their role—either direct or indirect—in drafting the National Education Projects led by the National Council for Education. These actors have also played a key role in the development of education policies and reforms. Though not always able to contain technocrats and other policymakers, they have certainly contributed to the continuity of agendas and to the advancement of reforms, however piecemeal.

Throughout the period, but especially in recent years, private interests, many with links and even representation in Congress, have also exerted a major influence over the course of reforms. While not explicitly targeted at the quality reforms, private interests acting against the development of the higher education reform, have frequently jeopardized the advance toward

key goals through their impact on ministerial crises that have led to sweeping changes of key policy teams.

Jaime Saavedra, formerly Peru's education minister and now senior director of education at the World Bank, points out that test scores were far from the only metric. True, the release of PISA scores placing Peru at the bottom kickstarted the opportunity for reform. But he emphasizes systemic change involving teaching, pedagogy, management, and infrastructure—akin to four wheels a car.²³

Moreover, as regards one of the most dynamic Ministers of Education who was and is an economist and came and went back to the World Bank, it is just not true that he was all about test scores as the only metric. I personally heard his pitch and reform plan and it emphasized that reform must be "integral" like a car with four wheels. Here is a description (on a [RISE blog](#)) of what Jaime says:

The keynote lunch address was from Jaime Saavedra, the former Peruvian education minister and currently the Senior Director of Education at the World Bank. I have seen Mr. Saavedra speak several times, and every time I take something new from his insights. In this instance, three points struck me the most. First, he pointed to what kick-started the opportunity for reform in Peru: the release of PISA scores showing Peru sitting at the bottom of the ranking. The stark result created a sense of urgency that helped the government push their proposed changes through. Second, he pointed to the importance of *systemic change* that is *integral*: he used the analogy of a car needing four wheels moving at the same time, and the wheels are: teachers, pedagogy, management, and infrastructure. Third, he noted that there are three critical requirements needed for a reform to work: good technical design, implementation capacity, and political alignment.

Ambitious plans and poor outcomes in Ethiopia

The Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Development Front committed to increasing access to education, particularly in the rural areas. Later, expanding education at all levels, including a massive expansion in higher education, became an important aspect of the regime's aspirations for legitimacy, especially after 2005, when the ruling party faced stiff competition from the opposition. The commitment to access has been widely successful, with the gross enrollment rate in primary education rising to 95 percent by 2013.

Government financing of education has been also generous, at roughly 25 percent of total government spending. In addition to expanding access, the government adopted measures to improve the quality of education such as the World Bank-supported General Education Quality Improvement Program, and the USAID-supported Improving Quality of Primary Education Program. Through these and other interventions over the last 15 years, teacher qualifications have improved, the supply and distribution of books have increased, and new methods of curriculum delivery including student-centered methods and continuous assessments have been introduced.

Several actors within the education sector in Ethiopia influence the direction of policy. While some stakeholders have a strong level of influence on the policies and strategies adopted, others have little, or even virtually nonexistent influence on policy processes. Federal government institutions such as the Ministry of Education, and the National Educational Assessment and

Examinations Agency as well as regional and local governments have an important role in policymaking and implementation. Donors were also important players. Actors such as parents, teachers' associations, and political parties have had limited influence.

The federal government, and principally the ruling party until 2018, have been the most important players. The leadership developed a clear and coherent set of policy and strategy documents, viewing education as the primary instrument for structural transformation and establishing the government's legitimacy. The provision of social services, especially education, is a core element of state legitimacy, which the EPRDF uses "to consolidate power and its support base by emphasizing and fulfilling its image as a revolutionary, pro-poor movement and as the representative of the rural masses."²⁴

Several government institutions influence the education system. These include the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Science and Higher Education), and the Ethiopia National Educational Assessment and Examinations Agency (NEAEA). Until recently, the Ministry of Education oversaw all subsectors of education from the preprimary level to higher education.

In addition to the federal government, regional state governments and local governments are important players in the education domain. Regional governments are responsible for primary education (grades 1–8). They choose languages of instruction, develop textbooks based on the national curriculum framework, prepare and administer regional examinations at the end of the second primary cycle, and administer manpower (teachers).

Local governments (*Woredas*) recruit teachers. Because of budgetary constraints and difficulty in attracting qualified teachers, some *Woredas* have hired school dropouts and those who have completed Grade 10, with little or no training.²⁵ *Woredas* also administer and oversee all schools within their domain. The primary motivation of *Woreda* political leaders is to increase access and student pass rates, rather than improve learning outcomes.²⁶ As a result, they put pressure on schools to inflate results. According to one interviewee from the Amhara region, political leaders interfere to "evaluate" results collected from schools within the *Woreda*, code for tampering with the results to inflate them, before the results are transferred to zones and regional level.²⁷

Learning outcomes remain dismal. The performance of students in early grades was low. In 2010, the Ministry of Education in collaboration with the USAID undertook the first Early Grade Reading Assessment conducted at Grades 2 and 3. The assessment revealed that a large number of grade 2 students could not read. As the assessments between 2014 and 2018 among grade 2 and 3 students also show, about two-thirds of them were either non-readers or had limited reading comprehension. Despite a lot of investment and measures to improve quality, a significant number of students remained illiterate after completing the first four years of primary schooling.²⁸ One factor contributing to low performance in the early grades is automatic promotion for students in grades 1–4, advancing them to the next grade at the end of the year irrespective of their educational attainment.

Missions of education bureaucracies

What does it take to have education bureaucrats pursue the goal of enhanced learning? As Levy writes, "what seems to make the crucial difference is a sense of mission (and accompanying de

facto peer-to-peer monitoring and accountability) even in the absence of a dense panoply of rules.”²⁹ From ministers of education to principals and teachers in schools, learning appears to be far down the list of motives and actions. Teachers have to do much more than teach their students. Unions are more interested in teacher pay and preservation than in evaluations that might guide in service training. Ministers come and go with new priorities and few resources. And then there’s Vietnam, where teachers show up on time and have a strong professional ethos (but can face a piling on of administrative demands that detract from teaching).

Contested identities and competing accountabilities in Pakistan

Pakistani public teachers can spend nearly half of the academic year performing non-pedagogic activities. Much of this seems to emanate from how the teacher’s role is positioned within, and by, structures of state and society. The contest between being a teacher and being a bureaucrat is not new to Pakistan, though it is underexplored as a driver of success for repeat education reform programs, which tend to frame teaching as a purely teacher training/education problem. The gaps in learning outcomes may, in fact, be engendered by a part of the system that does not concern itself directly with the business of teaching and learning, but inevitably affects the rules of service delivery.

As officers of the state, teachers in the public education system straddle a fine line of divergent responsibilities. On the one hand, they must follow departmental orders, regardless of their nature. On the other hand, they must be the teacher who enables and facilitates student learning in a classroom, a role that often requires drawing upon reserves of creativity and innovation to keep students engaged, learning, and happily returning to school throughout the year.

As bureaucrats, teachers can be asked by the provincial government to perform specific tasks that are beyond the immediate terms of their contracts or teaching duties. The effect of such asks on teacher time is one, however, that the state’s own metrics still do not recognize or capture. Time *is* the most important resource available to teachers in an already input-constrained environment. Every additional task that does not directly improve the condition of a student or the teacher’s own professional development inevitably requires a tradeoff against what might ideally be the most important performance outcome of the teacher bureaucrat: student learning.³⁰

Decades-long politics of patronage and compliance are still critical mediators of teacher performance.³¹ In addition, performance measurement does not seek to capture teacher effort in their everyday routines. With outdated definitions of experience and seniority, the rules for performance continue to reproduce narratives of generalized bureaucratic practice. In an environment of personal logic (based on cultural, religious, ethnic, gendered, or other such drivers), such rules are educationally irrelevant and collectively mocked by teacher collectives.

Understandably, then, reforms such as the 2014 teacher recruitment deprofessionalization—lowering standards for entering the profession and reducing the discretion of teachers in what and how to teach—do not work to improve learning levels in public education. The missing notion of teacher voice and experience from the formal instruments of state governance—such as rules, notifications, or even training manuals—creates frictions between official and lived meanings of ‘good’ teaching. This tension persists through a recruitment policy that has championed a gradual

deprofessionalization of teaching for almost a decade. But if anyone can teach, and teacher deployment has increased steadily over the time since this policy was notified, why has it not been met with a commensurate improvement in both teaching *and* student learning outcomes? Clearly, the provision of schools with more teachers does not automatically mean more or better learning.

One way to bring teacher recruitment into better alignment with an overall uplift to student learning is for the Elementary and Secondary Education Department to reconsider the rubrics or testing process it uses currently for the induction of new teachers. Instead of depending on the currently problematic notion of general standardized tests as an effective filter for pedagogic ability, the system may need to reintroduce technical elements. One of the biggest motivations for removing professional teacher qualifications (such as a Certificate of Teaching or B.Ed.) at the point of entry was to have better qualified individuals consider teaching as a career. This was accompanied by the assumption that the state of technical qualifications (at the time) was insufficient to guarantee meritorious teaching on appointment.

But by having stepped away entirely from educationally-anchored metrics or rubrics for applicant evaluation, the Department's intentions inevitably miss the requirements of a majority of its public schools—teachers who are motivated in the classroom, driven by a sense of professionalism and willing to meet the challenges that real classrooms send their way.

Technocratic policymaking hindering fundamental changes in Peru

One of the main elements in the political economy of quality and learning reforms has been the gradual transformation of the Ministry of Education and of the education policy arena in general. It has gone from a model of policymaking in which individual figures ruled, more or less freely, imposing their views and decisions regardless of the need for some level of policy coherence and continuity—to a much more technocratic model of policymaking, in which decisions fall in the hands of technocrats, many of them economists, whose main goals are to control spending and to ensure improvements in learning results as measured by standardized tests, but who may have a limited understanding of both the purpose and nature of desirable changes in school and classroom practices. This change has been gradual, with a degree of alternation between these two models of policymaking until recently. And it can be described as part of a broader, though slow, transformation and modernization of the public sector.

The emergence of a technocracy in the education sector, especially in the Strategic Planning Office of the MoE, with links to the MoF technocracy, has enabled greater degrees of continuity in certain policy actions, for instance, through the establishment of large-scale investment programs or interventions under a model of results-oriented budgeting. It has been positive in many regards, especially in containing the more whimsical, idiosyncratic, non-evidence based, and non-results-oriented policy styles of previous decades. But this new technocratic mode of policymaking—based on a narrow conception of educational quality as standardized test results—has ended up hindering the establishment of quality improvement policies more conducive to real changes in teaching and learning practices in schools.

The politics behind this narrowly technocratic model of approaching education reforms seems to run counter with the views of educational experts (those specializing in curriculum, pedagogy,

teacher training) who may have a deeper understanding of the complex and often time-consuming processes required to develop teachers' professional capacities and generate fundamental changes in teaching and learning.

The emergence of a technocracy in the MoE has its roots in the early 1990s, with the establishment of PLANMED, the Strategic Planning and Educational Quality Measurement office of the Ministry of Education, which would later become the Strategic Planning Secretariat. Largely funded with resources from the World Bank and later the InterAmerican Development Bank as part of the MECEP program, PLANMED was the first attempt at establishing a technocracy within the MoE, an institution that, like much of the Peruvian public sector at that time, was run by often self-serving officials, many of whom had acquired their posts through personal favors.³² It became the main "power house" for proposals such as the New Pedagogical Model, the new Baccalaureate, and the rural education project. It also gave rise to a more data-driven style of policymaking, through the establishment of the Learning Quality Assessment Unit and the modernization of the Educational Statistics Unit at the MoE. While PLANMED is often criticized for its weak capacity to translate broad ideas into concrete, implementable, and monitorable policies, it sought to combine an emphasis on pedagogical change, with a more modern style of policymaking.

Over time, and especially since 2006, the Strategic Planning Secretariat became a kind of mini-MoF inside the MoE, and there is even a movement of public officials from the former to the latter. This takeover is seen by some as part of a strategy by the MoF to leave the National Planning Center (CEPLAN) behind and to become the main engine for public policy planning. This technocratic model of policymaking, which has become institutionalized through results-based budgeting and through the MoF's control of the MoE's Strategic Planning Secretariat, has had both positive and negative effects. Positive because it has granted much needed degrees of continuity to certain policies. And negative because, through its accompanying understanding of the nature and goals of education policy, which has become the dominant settlement in education, it has led to a narrowing of education change agendas.

Hence the struggle between the goals of efficient management and those of pedagogical change. While the two are not (or should not be) contradictory, in practice they have become so, and this separation has become entrenched within the MoE. The reality is that pedagogical and strategic planning teams appear to speak different languages, and communication between the two is difficult.

Clear intentions but competing priorities in South Africa

The Department of Basic Education gives every impression that it is committed to maintaining the centrality of learning outcomes in a context of competing priorities. Commencing in 2015 government, through successive Annual Plans, the department has been setting unequivocal learning outcome targets for the system. The 2015 iteration laid the foundation,³³ setting 27 goals, as with:

- Goal 1: Increase the number of learners in Grade 3 who, by the end of the year, have mastered the minimum language and numeracy competencies for Grade 3.

- Goal 10: Ensure that all children remain effectively enrolled in school at least up to the year in which they turn 15.
- Goal 14: Attract a new group of young, motivated, and appropriately trained teachers to the teaching profession every year.

In addition, mindful of the fact that goals require adequate resourcing, targets were part of a package, including clear curriculum statements, textbooks, and national tests to help teachers teach to the level of the curriculum and measure progress against the goals. These measures provided stability and explicit guidance and support. And it is this policy clarity and systemic support cited by DBE in accounting for the learning gains over the last decade or more: issuing the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements, and monitoring teaching and learning through the National Learning Attainment Strategy.³⁴

Silo effects in the bureaucracy have made it difficult to make various actors unite around the overriding goal of sustaining improvements in learning. In the planning of teachers, where unions play a large role, a focus on remuneration has tended to crowd out proper analysis of the trade-off between the size of the teacher workforce and pay, in a context of shifting enrollments. The unintended consequence of this has been a continuation of a situation where half of primary learners, mostly the least advantaged, experience class sizes in excess of what the physical classroom was designed to accommodate. The effects of this on the teaching of foundational skills are presumably significant.³⁵

Many of the obstacles in the political realm are difficult to change. The electoral system rewards politicians who respond to popular demands, but such demands tend to focus on very visible phenomena such as school infrastructure and obtaining the Grade 12 certificate. Learning in the early grades has become more visible due to practices occurring in samples or pockets of the system. How to make this visible across all primary schools through better availability of information, and better systems development capacity—and how to link information to school accountability in ways that avoid pitfalls in South Africa’s recent past—are politically and ideologically charged questions.

Teachers driven by their professional ethos in Vietnam

Teachers show up on time and are driven by a professional ethos, in part because Vietnam’s political organization demands consistent attention to education from the level of policymaking to the daily management of Vietnam’s 63 provinces, 700+ districts, 11,000+ communes, and urban wards, and to its tens of thousands of schools.

Vietnam’s teaching corps have been praised for professionalism, reflected in high levels of attendance and dedication. Schools are steeped in a culture of accountability and most (though not all) school principals are members of the communist Party. These features of accountability have contradictory effects. They incentivize normative conformity in ways that are supportive of certain kinds of learning, as by rote. But they can be a liability, particularly when political conservatism among school principals or more senior teachers short circuit efforts to escape outdated curricula and teaching methods.

The adoption of professional standards for teachers and school leaders has come with the heightened promotion of accountability and standardization in the education system. Teachers’

standards, first introduced in 2007, are part of the state efforts to assure quality of the teaching force and hold teachers accountable for learning performance. The updated set of profession standards for teachers, released in 2018, included requirements higher than the previous standards, leading to many teachers becoming underqualified and seeking to be upgraded. Despite the good intention of standardization policies, many teachers found the process of meeting the teacher standards to be highly bureaucratic and time consuming given their already heavy teaching and administrative loads.

In the context of “Fundamental and Comprehensive Education Reform,” teachers have been placed at the forefront to improve the education quality oriented toward competency development instead of content-based teaching and learning. Teachers across the country have attended intensive cascade professional training for competency teaching. They are also expected to have autonomy and demonstrate competencies such as creative thinking and problem solving, core learning outcomes they need to develop in students. Paradoxically, they are also demanded to demonstrate patriotism and a love for socialism, and strictly comply with the Party’s line in addition to the state’s policies and laws. Although this mandate has been removed from the latest regulation, it remains as one of the key learning outcomes for future teachers in all teacher education programs.

Deprofessionalized teaching in Ethiopia

Teaching as a profession started to decline during the Derg regime in the early years after the revolution in 1974, largely due the decision to expand access to education despite a reduction in funds. The *Idget Be Hibret* campaign (“Development through Cooperation and Work”) involved sending tens of thousands of high school and university students and teachers to rural areas to support reforms, including the nationalization of land. Teachers increasingly spent their time away from teaching and undertaking administrative tasks for local government structures, particularly to *kebele* (the lowest level of government administration).³⁶ Elementary instruction was only in Amharic, limiting access in areas where it was not spoken.³⁷ The teachers’ association was not strong enough to defend the profession, nor was there strong leadership within the school and educational administrative structure.³⁸

The 1994 Education and Training Policy underlined the need for qualified teachers at all levels of education. It envisaged able, diligent, motivated, and physically and mentally fit teachers to meet the expansion of education across the country. Despite some reforms such as the Teacher Development Program, Teacher Education System Overhaul in 2003 by the Ministry of Education and the subsequent implementation of the Post-Graduate Diploma Program in Teaching, the quality of teacher education was not significantly improved. The Overhaul was a national government-initiated and donor-supported program to strengthen teacher training. It focused on teacher education where student teachers spend more time on practicum attachments and interact with students using active learning.

The Overhaul was abandoned in 2009 without any formal evaluation, and the Ministry of Education announced Post-Graduate Diploma Training. A university graduate with a first degree but no pedagogical training could apply for a post-graduate diploma program in teaching. But the initiative was not welcomed by most educators and faced serious resistance, even by the students. It increased the number of less passionate, demotivated first-degree holders who were

unemployed in their respective specialization and found teaching as a bridge until they get a “better” job. As a result, the education roadmap study team recommended revitalizing the principles and practices of teacher development starting from undergraduate education. Accordingly, students who join teacher training programs are offered pedagogical courses in addition to courses in their areas of specialization.

The 2007 Teachers Development Blueprint, despite its pitfalls, provided a framework for teacher policy reform, including career development. It aimed to make education an attractive career choice and improve the quality of teachers.³⁹ It also tried to set merit-based and attractive career, moral, financial, and material benefits for teachers nominated as competent and committed to their teaching profession— for example, deserving teachers being honored by commemorative schools in their names, housing opportunities, banking loans, accelerated career structure (skipping career ladder), further education opportunities, free education trips, and top-up payments for extra duties. But its promises, by and large, were not implemented.

Teacher satisfaction in their career has declined since the introduction of the teacher career ladder policy. One of the sources of stress for teachers was found to be the unjust implementation process of the career structure where competence as a criterion was mixed with other less important criteria. The Education Sector Development Plan for 2016–20 aspired to transform teaching into a profession of choice, as applicants would have access to motivating career development opportunities from the time of their application. But neither implementation strategies nor action plans were formulated.

Expectations of societies

What are the expectations of parents, communities, businesses, and citizens for public schools and the delivery of learning? They could be well-articulated and influential, or they could be passive and cynical, “shaped by experience of an education system deeply mired in patronage, predation, political capture, opportunism, and corruption.”⁴⁰ Vietnam and Indonesia exemplify the extremes.

All for learning in Vietnam

Many features of education system and its performance depend on a range of relationships, processes, and institutionalized practices that define how citizens engage with their education system and the politics of education and learning. Thus, the spirit of “all for education” that the Party sought to impart through mobilization politics in the 1980s did not cease in the somewhat chaotic circumstances of the country’s transition to a more-market based economy. On the contrary, Vietnam’s growing economy promises returns to education and the expectation of expanded economic opportunity and has thus incentivized household investments in education.

The Study Encouragement Movement began in the early-1990s, with the activities of local actors aiming to promote learning in both formal and informal education, frequently involving small organizations such as local patrilineal associations. Major activities of many (grassroots) associations centered around how to get donations or financial contributions from local families, businesses, and organizations to promote learning of local students and community members.

Vietnam's politics and the public governance its education system have shaped the system's performance. The Communist Party of Vietnam's political commitment to education—visible both at the level of elite politics *and* in the routine processes and compliance procedures of its sprawling Party state—has prioritized education over several decades across all levels of public administration. And patterns of societal engagement—visible in public and private investments in education and in a surprisingly active education-specific public sphere—have given the education system considerable attention to the daily affairs of the country.

Vietnam's press and mass media and its vibrant new media platforms have figured substantially in the evolution of the education system and are essential in the system's social embedding, evolution, and performance over time. Historically and up to the present, features of the production and consumption of mass media, specialized media, and new media in Vietnam have—at times—had the practical effect of strengthening the coherence of the education system for learning. Vietnam's press and mass media and the broader public's participation in social media have sometimes enhanced accountability both *within* the education system and the system's relations to stakeholders in its broader social environment.

A felicitous ratcheting up of public awareness of problems in the education system permitted locally-based citizens to grasp local and extra-local aspects of the system's functioning and of the significance of accountability. Viewed from within the system, the presence of voices for accountability from the press and society (via new media) have, in combination with the party-state's formal and informal compliance mechanisms and pressures stemming from societal buy-in, increased the perceived need within the system to maintain adherence to formal norms, probity, and preparedness for answerability.

Overall, social media, traditional and digitized media outlets have contributed to the rise of something resembling a public sphere in which expanding channels of communication have had the paradoxical effect of expanding coverage of the education system—thereby calling attention to its various achievements and challenges. Social media have been especially instrumental in exposing and facilitating attention to education sector corruption scandals, including recent high-profile cases that resulted in long prison sentences.

The performance of Vietnam's education system was by no means fated—it reflects the sort of “all for learning” spirit that is all too often lacking. In its efforts to further promote learning, the country has many things in its favor, including an enduring political and societal commitment born of historical experiences and an expanding and globalizing economy presenting good opportunities and incentives. These factors combined with the citizenry's active involvement in education—through various active forms of cooperation and contestation—generated elements of performance pressure in the system. But all is not well. Policymakers and the public now view the education system as falling well short of its desired functions and have much higher expectations.

Curriculum reform in Indonesia

Curriculum reform in Indonesia under the New Order (1966–1998) failed to drive improvements in learning outcomes because it was primarily an exercise in regime maintenance rather than learning enhancement. The collapse of that regime in 1998 opened up an opportunity to address

urgent concerns about the quality and relevance of student learning outcomes. Technocratic elements within successive governments came to dominate the policymaking process at the national level, with a high degree of cohesion over the goal of improving learning outcomes to meet perceived labor market demands. However, at the implementation level, curriculum reform has been shaped by a range of competing political agendas. Overall there has been a 'poor fit'⁴¹ between national and district level political and institutional contexts and various relationships of accountability between actors within the system have been marked by a high degree of incoherence.⁴² The result has been a very weak correlation between curriculum reform and the improvement of learning outcomes in schools.

Fittingly, the first curricular reform of the post-Suharto era was to address his historical legacy. A key motivation for 'Curriculum Supplement 1999' (an amendment to the 1994 Curriculum) was to revise content regarding the rise of the New Order and the role of the military in politics. It was an early sign of the shift to an inclusionary political settlement around the issue of curriculum design, as the decision was a highly symbolic acknowledgement of the role of progressive coalitions (particularly university students) in forcing Suharto's resignation.

The far more substantial reform, however, was the launching of a new curriculum in 2004. The design of the new curriculum was led by the Ministry's Curriculum Centre, which had commenced work in 2000 as a continuation of reforms to the 1994 curriculum.⁴³ It contained the hallmarks of the technocratic agenda, especially New Public Management theory, as student learning outcomes were tied to a range of defined competency standards and associated indicators. The preamble to the policy set education provision within a framework of regional and global competitiveness, in which 'the quality improvement of our human resources must be the first priority.'⁴⁴ It was in stark contrast to the New Order priority of 'creating the true Pancasila individual'.⁴⁵

The speed of the shift was startling. Only a few years prior, the 'divergence of opinion with regard to educational philosophy among key stake holders' had been identified as a primary obstacle to curriculum development.⁴⁶ Now a curriculum had been launched that was closely aligned with a global education orthodoxy based around standardization, core competencies, and corporate management practices. While it is tempting to seek out the smoking gun that triggered this package of policy reform, the more realistic scenario was a confluence of factors. Comparable developments in neighboring countries were one reference point, as was input from multilateral agencies such as the World Bank, which had long pressed for market-oriented reforms to the education sector

At the school level, the curriculum overhauls prompted confusion and hesitancy among teachers. Three decades of didactic policy control from the center had left them utterly unprepared for the level of agency granted them in content development and competency assessment.⁴⁷ At the same time, institutional and political reform at the center was not matched by similar processes in the districts. Established hierarchies and practices in local institutional contexts not only weathered *reformasi*, but in many cases were strengthened.⁴⁸

The implication for learning outcomes was that the main quality assurance mechanism for a textbook was the size of the kickback a publisher could muster. As was the case with the tendering for national exam support services, providers often sought to maximize their margins

by using the cheapest available materials. Worse still, the practice had the effect of driving up the cost of schooling for parents as school principals were often complicit in the system. Students went from being consumers (the neoliberal ideal) to a captive market (the predatory reality).

Much analysis of the politics of learning in developing countries expresses hope that parents and children—as the principal users/clients of education systems—will exercise ‘voice’ in a way that serves to put pressure on education providers and the state to improve quality. Yet parents and students have been at best a minor player in contests over education policy and its implementation in Indonesia, with the dysfunctional character of school committees being perhaps the clearest indication of their weakness in this respect. To be sure a few individual parents—typically from middle class backgrounds—joined forces with NGOs and other progressive elements to engage in litigation that defeated market-oriented policies, the national exam, and the ‘international standard schools’ policy.⁴⁹ But the wider pattern has been one of inaction.

Moving to a competency-based curriculum in Kenya

The new competency-based curriculum is intended to create a radical shift in education delivery. It is geared to developing a holistic individual equipped with theory and application skills and holding society’s values. The role of parents is to harness and nurture their children’s emotional and intellectual potential. The 21st century skill base integrates communication, collaboration, self-efficacy, critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, imagination, and computer literacy. But despite the deliberate move from conventional principles of teaching and learning to progressive and constructivist principles, the inertia toward change remains, and it is still unclear how assessment criteria should be developed in each learning area.

Learners are expected to spend two years at an early childhood center before entering primary school, yet the centers are ill-prepared. Nor is there a framework to guide the implementation. Moreover, teacher knowledge of the curriculum is vague, hence their inability to teach and evaluate it. Further training and more sessions for re-skilling need to be offered by the Kenya Institute for Curriculum Development to prepare teachers in pedagogy, assessment, and document preparation.

The lack of teacher training and preparedness in the new curriculum is a big impediment to its effective implementation. Teachers complain of lack of knowledge on the expected pedagogies and the needed exposure and practice. Teachers have not embraced the discovery method, the preferred mode. Teacher centeredness in the classroom remains, and student-centered instruction is not visible in most schools, understandable due to large class sizes. The effects of these ambiguities in the instruction process will have adverse effects on the intended goals, such as discovering learner talents and skills and developing their capabilities.

In addition, inadequate funding and shortages of quality teaching materials in most schools are complicating implementation. The national government is expected to provide adequate resources to schools to ensure equity, particularly for marginalized groups in urban slums and in arid and semiarid regions. The integration of ICT in teaching and learning is inadequate yet necessary to enhance content delivery and classroom engagement. In countries where the curriculum has been implemented, teachers lack a thorough understanding of the requirements.

This incongruence has reduced competencies to a checklist, with meeting both learning targets and mastery outcomes elusive. A big question is how to ensure parity given that preparing materials in the 43 ethnic languages are at different stages of production.

The persistent disparities between private and public schools are becoming more visible in the implementation of a new curriculum that requires massive resources. As public schools struggle with inadequate resources and poor preparation, private schools with more resources are forging ahead with implementation. And although incentivizing parental involvement in their children's education is critical, parents are encountering the same obstacles as teachers, with inadequate capacity hindering their effective support to learners. Despite all this, the competency-based system of education is still favored by almost 90 percent of stakeholders, including parents, in a RISE-supported survey, due its ability to nurture talent and creativity to improve the prospects for getting good jobs.

So...

Recent literature on the politics of education and learning does not go far enough in its analysis of politics or deep enough in the analysis of the dynamic features of the education system's dynamic interdependence with its social environment. But there is value in exploring the politics of learning from a sociological perspective, appreciating that the effectiveness of any education system depends on features of its societal embedding. And a historical sociological exploration of a country's education can reveal the specific ways that education systems are embedded in their social environments. There is also value in making the analysis of principal-agent relations that shape education system performance, however complex, intelligible to normal people and presented in a way that is comprehensible to the diversity of education system stakeholders (annex 1 sets out the 4x5 education systems analytical framework; annex 2 presents some indicators of system performance for the 12 countries).

Annex 1 The 5x4 RISE Education Systems Framework

Five features of each relationship of accountability (principal to agent)

	Politics: Citizens and the highest executive, legislative, and fiduciary authorities of the state	Compact: Highest executive, legislative, and fiduciary authorities of the state to education authority	Management: Education authorities and frontline providers (schools, school leaders, and teachers)	Voice & Choice: Service recipients (parents/children) and providers of service (schools, school leaders, teachers)
Delegation: what the principal wants the agent to do				
Finance: the resources the principal has allocated to the agent to achieve assigned task				
Information: how the principal assesses the agent's performance				
Support: preparation and assistance that the principal provides to the agent to complete the task				
Motivation: how the principal motivates the agent, including the ways in which agent's welfare is contingent on their performance against objectives				

The performance of the agent is the endogenous, or organic, outcome of the interactions between the actors in the system. The interactions between the actors in the system are characterized by the design elements of the relationships. The system delivers learning when strong relationships of accountability align across design elements and around learning objectives.

Annex 2 Indicators of learning for RISE countries

A country's learning adjusted years of school combines the quantity and quality of schooling into a single indicator by multiplying the estimated years of schooling by the ratio of the country's score on the most recent test scores harmonized to 625 (World Bank data for latest year of assessment).

Learning poverty, a combined measure of schooling and learning, is the proportion of children unable to read and understand a simple text by age 10 (World Bank data for 2019).

The Human Capital Index is the amount of human capital that children born today can expect to acquire by the age of 18 given the prevailing risks of poor health and poor education. It combines the likelihood of surviving to school age, the amount of school they will complete and the learning they'll acquire, and whether they leave school ready for further learning and work. For example, a score of 0.5 means that they will be only 50 percent as productive as they might be with complete education and full health—and that their future earning potentials will be 50 percent below what they might have been.⁵⁰

	Learning adjusted years of school	Learning poverty (%)	Human Capital Index (0–1)
Chile	9.4	27.2	0.7
Egypt	6.5	69.6	0.5
Ethiopia	4.3	90.4	0.4
India	7.1	56.1	0.5
Indonesia	7.5	52.8	0.5
Kenya	8.5	—	0.5
Nigeria	5	—	0.4
Pakistan	5.1	77	0.4
Peru	8.6	44.4	0.6
South Africa	5.6	78.9	0.4
Tanzania	4.5	—	0.4
Vietnam	10.7	18.1	0.7

Note: — = not available.

Notes

¹ World Bank et al. 2022. *The State of Global Learning Poverty: 2022 Update*. Washington DC.

² The Human Capital Index is a summary measure of the amount of human capital that a child born today can expect to acquire by age 18, given the risks of poor health and poor education that prevail in the country where she lives. Ranging between 0 and 1, the index takes the value 1 only if a child born today can expect to achieve full health (defined as no stunting and survival up to at least age 60) and achieve her formal education potential (defined as 14 years of high-quality school by age 18).

³ Conversation with Lant Pritchett.

⁴ Levy 2022.

⁵ Levy 2022: 30.

⁶ Semboja and Terkildsen 1994.

⁷ Samoff 1979a; Mbilinyi 2003; Therkildsen 2000.

⁸ Ishumi 1984; Biswalo 1985; Carnoy and Samoff 1990.

⁹ Nyerere 1982, p. 30.

¹⁰ Fisher, González, and Serra 2006; Siavelis and Sehnbruch 2013.

¹¹ González 1998; Fischer, González, and Serra 2006.

¹² Siavelis and Sehnbruch, 2013; Solimano, 2012.

¹³ González, 1998.

¹⁴ Conversation with Lant Pritchett.

¹⁵ Schiefelbein 1995; González, Fernández, and Leyton 2020.

¹⁶ North, Wallis, and Weingast 2009.

¹⁷ Dang and Glewwe 2018.

¹⁸ Conversation with Lant Pritchett.

¹⁹ Levy 2022:30.

²⁰ Rosser et al. 2005.

²¹ Lant Pritchett notes that Indonesia has participated in lots of international assessments and typically has a PISA (or equivalent) score of around 400, which is roughly where most Latin American countries are—and way, way, ahead of India, Pakistan, or most African countries (except possibly Kenya). So Indonesia's problem is not pure dysfunction—it is stagnation at a modest/low level. On PISA scores, Indonesia is between Chile (which does pretty well) and most of the PISA-D countries (Zambia, Paraguay, Guatemala)—and is about exactly where Brazil and Ecuador are. So outcomes in Indonesia are not terrible (and better in the public than in the private sector), and elites are more "parasitic" (living off an organism) than "predatory" (eating dead prey).

²² Rosser and Fahmi 2016: 16–19.

²³ Scur 2017.

²⁴ Wales, Magee & Nicolai, 2016: 21.

²⁵ Interview, current education official 1, July 27, 2021.

²⁶ Interview, current education official 1, July 27, 2021.

²⁷ Interview, regional education expert 1, July 28, 2021.

²⁸ Interview, current education official 1, July 27, 2021.

²⁹ Levy 2022:33.

³⁰ Rasul, Rogger, and Williams 2018.

³¹ Levy et al. 2018.

³² Hunt 2001, Hunt 2004, Ministry of Education 1993.

³³ Department of Basic Education 2019.

³⁴ Maboya 2018.

³⁵ The notion that reducing class sizes does not improve learning is common in education planning. However, as argued in Gustafsson and Mabogoane (2012), this draws almost exclusively from research in developed countries, and relates to marginal changes in class sizes where the point of departure is completely different from that in South Africa.

³⁶ Interview, education researcher 2, July 30, 2021.

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- ³⁷ Interview, regional education expert 3, July 29, 2021.
- ³⁸ Interview, education researcher 2, July 30, 2021.
- ³⁹ Interview, former education official 2, July 30, 2021.
- ⁴⁰ Levy 2022:33.
- ⁴¹ Levy et al. 2018.
- ⁴² Spivak 2021.
- ⁴³ Soedijarto et al. 2010: 95.
- ⁴⁴ Departmen Pendidkan Nasional 2003.
- ⁴⁵ As stated in one the first formal New Order statements on the goal of the national education system. See Ketetapan MPRS No. XXVII/1966.
- ⁴⁶ UNESCO 1999: 86.
- ⁴⁷ Yani 2005.
- ⁴⁸ Hadiz 2010.
- ⁴⁹ Rosser and Curnow 2014; Rosser 2015.
- ⁵⁰ World Bank Human Capital Index for September 2020.

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