Purpose driven education systems: How systems shift

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Start with a puzzle: Vietnam

The gaps in learning outcomes for 15-year-old students between PISA-D countries and the equivalent child in Vietnam are around 200 PISA points.

Mathematics scores of advantaged, socio-economic elite, students

Mathematics scores of Vietnamese students with same characteristics

Vietnamese students far outperform children with similar demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, even in wealthier countries.

Source: Adapted from Pritchett & Viarengo, 2021; “advantaged” = male, urban, native speaker, non-immigrant, and SES elite
Start with a puzzle: Sobral, Brazil

Schools in Sobral, Brazil outperform their much higher SES peers

Sobral, Brazil, rose from 1,366th municipality to #1 on Brazil’s national assessment in 12 years.

While most of Sobral’s schools are in the second lowest SES category, they now outperform nearly all schools of higher SES.

Source: Cruz & Loureiro, 2020
What explains such learning achievements?

• In these examples, higher income/resources and/or greater knowledge of what to do to achieve learning cannot explain differences in outcomes

• These examples (and others) leave us with much more complex questions of “How?” and “Why?” success was achieved
In this presentation I will:

• Propose a conceptual framework for understanding drivers of education system performance, and use it to argue that commitment to the purpose of learning is a critical missing link to addressing the learning crisis

• Apply the conceptual framework to examples of successful system improvements

• Describe efforts that have fostered commitment to the purpose of learning.
Like organizations, education systems have a technical core made up of purpose and technical practices and surrounded by support functions.

**Purpose**: Set of strongly held beliefs about why organization/system exists

- Explicit
- Implicit

**Technical practices**: Technical skills and know-how necessary for achieving the purpose

**Support functions**: Create operating conditions for technical core
The role of Purpose in education system outcomes

Most interventions focus on technical practices (e.g. teacher training)
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Or support functions (e.g. expanding EMIS systems; procuring more inputs, etc.)
The role of Purpose in education system outcomes

Purpose receives little attention, and we argue it is a missing link.

Most interventions focus on technical practices (e.g., teacher training).

Or support functions (e.g., expanding EMIS systems; procuring more inputs, etc.).

See, for example, Evans and Popova (2016) analysis of 6 systematic reviews; of 15 classes of interventions analyzed, 4 relate to technical practices, 10 relate to support functions, and just 1 can be construed as relating to instilling purpose.
The many forms of education system purpose: a few examples

- **Maintenance of elite-focused education**
  - Often implicit
  - May include expansion of *schooling* for masses, but *quality education* only for elite
  - e.g. India as a “sorting and selection” system (Muralidharan & Singh, 2021)

- **Contested purpose**
  - The system has “too many” purposes (even if all are good, legitimate purposes, the system is pulled in too many directions)
  - Contradictory purposes
  - Outright disagreement or infighting about purpose

For more see: Muralidharan & Singh, 2021; Paglayan, 2022; Beatty & Pritchett, 2012; Atuhurra & Kaffenberger, 2020; Aiyar et al., 2021
The many forms of education system purpose: a few examples

- **Corrupted purpose**
  - Purpose has been hijacked or supplanted by another (sometimes hidden) purpose
  - Purposes may include rents (for officials, contractors through procurement, etc.); maintaining bureaucratic compliance; etc.

- **Repurposed to encompass learning for all**
  - Includes establishment of learning as a fundamental purpose of the education system, followed by actions to support this purpose
  - Commitment to the purpose of learning for all may be necessary (even if not sufficient) for achieving large-scale learning improvements

Repurposed education systems: Sobral, Brazil

**Establishment of purpose**

- Assessment found 40% primary school students could not read
- Municipal leaders established learning as core purpose: goals for universal literacy in first 2 years of primary school, and remediation for older students
- Dedication and commitment to purpose filtered through all levels of system

**Improvements to technical practices to achieve purpose**

- Extensive support to teachers and other frontline workers in support of purpose (structured lesson plans, aligned teaching materials, professional development based on materials, classroom observation and coaching, etc.)

**Improvements to support functions to achieve purpose**

- Improvements to HR (e.g., meritocratic hiring of school principals); information systems (new learning-based monitoring systems), etc.

Large learning gains, rising from 1,366th ranked municipality to #1 in 12 years.

For more see: Cruz & Loureiro, 2020; Crouch, 2020; Kaffenberger & Spivack, 2022.
Repurposed education systems: Tanzania

Establishment of purpose
- Between 2006-2012 pass rates on PLE more than halved, to just 31%, and Uwezo, EGRA, and EGMA all showed poor results
- Spurred gvt to institute 3Rs curriculum reform with clearly established purpose to improve reading, writing, and arithmetic in grades 1 and 2
- 80% of instructional time allocated to these topics – showing commitment to goals

Improvements to technical practices to achieve purpose
Support to teachers, including new curriculum, textbooks, instructional materials, in-service training, and continuous prof dev; training for head teachers; and support to school leadership.

Improvements to support functions to achieve purpose
New information for monitoring learning (e.g. new grade 2 assessment); financing in support of learning goals.

Learning gains for both Kiswahili and mathematics, particularly for low performers; increased school retention

Fostering commitment to the purpose of learning

1. Conducting / funding learning assessments to spur political and citizen-led attention and pressure to act
   • (Citizen-led assessments; EGRA and EGMA; national assessments or participation in regional or international assessments.)

2. Supporting domestic think- and do-tanks
   • (Organizations like Pratham; Central Square Foundation; Centre for the Study of the Economies of Africa (CSEA) in Nigeria; SMERU and INOVASI in Indonesia; CIASES in Nicaragua)

3. Funding programs and scholarships for tomorrow’s leaders
   • (Programs like Teach for All; Vanderbilt’s Graduate Program in Economic Development; Africa Fellowship Program; African Leadership Academy)

“The systems that change are the ones that want to change”
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