The Wisdom of the International Education Sector's Elders: Lessons for How to Improve Learning

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Summary

Education donors should be driven by evidence in their decision-making just as much as implementers and governments. This is particularly important given the magnitude of the learning crisis (World Bank, 2021), the compounding COVID-19 learning loss in many low- and middle-income countries (LMICs)s (Moscoviz & Evans, 2022) and the likely impacts on long-term human capital development and economic growth (Angrist, et al., 2021). Given the urgency of the task ahead of us, I requested the ideas and wisdom of some of the most talented and knowledgeable people in international education. In this essay, I analyze findings from 61 interviews drawn from a range of actors in the sector, including education researchers, international and country level implementers, bilateral, multilateral and foundation donors supporting LMICs. This qualitative data was collected through a structured interview protocol that asked respondents a range of questions developed in my attempt to answer four research questions: 1) What are the characteristics of an effective donor? 2) What should the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation improve or change in our work in the sector? 3) What are the key technical things that we should or should not support? 4) Who are the technically strong local education partners in Sun-Saharan Africa?

The interview participants represented a broad range of countries of origin, gender and positions. Regardless of that diversity, there was remarkable convergence on several key findings. First, I structured these interviews as a means to determine whether the foundation should continue its focus on foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN). I included participants who I knew would be skeptical on this topic. The data showed substantial support for a clear focus on improving learning outcomes in lower primary, though respondents provided several ideas on how to do that more effectively. Second, the sector has strong views about what the attributes of effective grantmakers are. These included their ability to listen, their willingness to learn from the expertise of partners, communicate clearly on areas of focus, and responsiveness to grantees. In addition, the respondents were adamant about the important convening role that foundations can have as well as the responsibility that this role places on a donor to do that convening and utilization of voice effectively. Third, the interview respondents had clear suggestions on what the education sector needed more of. These solutions included improving the quality of support to teachers implementing FLN programs, narrowing the gap between research and implementation and focusing on how to embed change into systems at scale. These leaders also had compelling guidance about what the sector needs to stop doing. These issues include the types and methods of teacher training that we know are not effective, short-term program cycles, and Western or Northern ideas imposed on education leaders in LMICs. These findings were useful to me in my role in the sector but are also important evidence to share with the broader education sector.

Context

I joined the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation as Director of Global Education in December 2021, after spending the last 14 years in East Africa researching and supporting large-scale education programs in LMICs. Shifting from my role as a researcher to a grantmaker offered a new challenge, though I am

fortunate that the current focus of many partners in the sector is how to improve learning outcomes for primary-age children, a topic that I have experience with. This role shift offered a new perspective from which to engage with the global education sector, and a unique opportunity to begin my new position by hearing from key partners about their views about the education sector and our role in it.

In my first two months in the role, I undertook 61 interviews with researchers, implementers and other grantmakers to learn from their experience and expertise. The analysis in this essay draws heavily on these conversations, and the reflections of this group of experts on the research questions above. While the sections below explore the analysis from the interviews in more detail, my fundamental takeaway from these conversations, combined with my analysis of the Gates Foundation funding portfolio is clear: **now, more than ever, a sharp focus on achieving improved FLN is needed, particularly inside of government systems and at scale.** We have to succeed, and succeed at scale, succeed inside of government systems, and succeed with local education leaders at the fore of design, implementation and decision-making. It is only after governments have better functioning systems of carefully designed materials development, skills-based teacher training, low cost coaching or other teacher support structures, and a clear expectation of daily instructional methods and improved learning outcomes, that we will see learning improvement in literacy, numeracy, or any other learning area of interest, including socio-emotional learning, life skills or STEM. Systems that have already shown to be successful on the tasks required to do FLN well are laying the groundwork to improving learning in other areas and in more grades. The evidence base about the types of programs that can and do work at scale is substantial, with structured pedagogy and teaching at the right level approaches both showing impacts at scale for a typical rural primary teacher (Angrist, et al., 2021; RTI, 2021). What matters now is the actual implementation quality of these sorts of programs, the *how*. I think it's the how that should be the emphasis of our funding, our energy and our research.

Unfortunately, capturing the entirety of themes and insights from all of these the conversations is beyond the scope of this essay, instead I will focus on the key research questions outlined above.

1) What are the characteristics of an effective donor?

A core topic of these qualitative conservations focused on effective grantmaking in general, and our (the Global Education team of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation) role within the sector in particular.

First, many colleagues highlighted the importance of meaningful partnership with grantees as the cornerstone of an effective grantmaker. This meant listening and learning from grantee expertise, as well as the importance of the grantmaker bringing their own knowledge to the table, *"Respect that those on the ground have better knowledge on the ground, leverage the donor's global knowledge."* This also meant clear and consistent communications with grantees, both about their strategic priorities, and their expectations within a specific project "*don't move the goalposts or change the rules of the game. At least not without fair warning."* In order to do this though, grantmakers need a clear view of their own comparative advantage, and role within the sector *"be clear about the thesis about what change you are trying to make in the sector. Be consistent in that and work around it."* Finally, the interviews highlighted the need to learn from, and collaborate with other donors in the space, to avoid silos or duplication: *"What is dysfunctional in development is that a lot of people work in silos. Programs are run independently of one another."* This coordination is required at both the international and country levels.

Interviewees shared specific feedback about the role and contribution that the Global Education team at the foundation could play the sector, as well as where we have room for improvement. In addition to the reflections above about the importance of our focus on improving learning through systems at scale, we heard a need to communicate our education strategy more broadly, and to increase visibility on the work we are supporting. Others encouraged us to consider our comparative advantage within the sector, or to *"Understand what you can do that others can't".* One area that received consistent support was around our role as an influencer and a convenor within the sector. For example, using our voice, as well as our funding, to drive impact, with one partner highlighting that *"[the foundation's] influence is more likely to be through ideas and capabilities than through grant aid for physical inputs".* Many interviewees highlighted a gap in the sector in bringing partners together, with an interest in convening partners around technical areas of mutual interest, e.g. *"Working out how to bring people together collaboratively. Create a community of practice on the issues."*

Balancing this role as influencer and convener, however, was a clear cautionary note around the importance of using influence responsibly, recognizing power imbalances, and showing humility. One quote in particular resonated: *"Whatever you say as Gates has undue influence. How do you acknowledge that dynamic and find how to be humble?"* These frank reflections were appreciated and well received. We will continue our sharp focus on FLN and support of our grantees, while considering opportunities to convene partners around shared areas of interest on improving learning. With this in mind, we will respect the expertise of partners, seeking out challenge and feedback on our work, and collaborating and communicating more transparently and consistently.

2) What should the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation improve or change in our work in the sector?

The foundation is a recent arrival in the global education sector, having launched the Global Education team only in 2018. Under the leadership of our greatly missed Girin Beeharry, the foundation developed a strategy focused on improving FLN in India and Sub-Saharan Africa. In Girin's recent essay in the International Journal of Education Development (Beeharry, 2021), he issued an urgent call to the sector to prioritize the improvement of FLN in low-income countries. He highlighted the further need for actors in the sector to monitor performance on improving FLN, and to hold ourselves mutually accountable for making progress.

Across the interviews, there was support for the need for focus within the sector, as well as specific reinforcement of our emphasis on FLN. There was also recognition that while there are many important areas, prioritization is crucial - as one interviewee put it, *"if you have 100 priorities, you have zero priorities".* Support for FLN came through both because of the importance of these skills for later outcomes, *"Focus on FLN is good - if you do well on that, you give life skills to young people"* but also on the flipside, that without first establishing strong FLN it does not make sense to focus on other areas: *"Stop teaching things that aren't reading if they can't read."* The importance of data also emerged in several interviews, with one interviewee commenting, that a *"well-functioning education system needs data".* However, others emphasized the importance of how data is used, and considering which decisions data will inform.

There were also some welcome areas of constructive criticism and challenge. Several conversations touched on the need to elevate numeracy within FLN, where the emphasis often falls on literacy - *"within FLN - there is too much focus on reading, but could push more for numeracy".* The Learning at Scale program we are funding initially focused on large scale and highly effective literacy programs

because evidence of impact at large scale was more readily available for literacy programs, but is shifting its focus on 2022 to identify, research and learn from highly effective large scale numeracy programs. It was also noted that a better job could be done of positioning, or marketing, FLN – we know that using this terminology, and the acronym, can seem needlessly technical. Others have their sights set beyond FLN, including colleagues worried about the positioning of FLN as the only priority, those keen to highlight the connection between FLN and other outcomes, and those looking to the medium term, who see success in the early primary grades as a steppingstone to improving upper primary and secondary. We fundamentally agree with this view.

Our Global Education strategy continues to focus on improving foundational learning, supporting partners working on data and assessments and advocacy for action; research to improve teaching and learning, and strengthening systems at scale, as well as effective implementation at the country level in India and Sub-Saharan Africa. As we move forward, directing our attention towards **how** foundational learning can be achieved at scale will be crucial. In short, we need to build out the toolkit of effective pedagogical strategies for improving literacy and numeracy, and test and adapt implementation approaches to understand how these can be integrated into typical rural classrooms within government systems across LMICs. This is why we need to continue to focus on literacy and numeracy now – these are enormously difficult tasks and we need to build from success at the country level to expand the learning improvement focus across the broader sector in the years to come.

3) What are the key technical things that we should or should not support?

The third research question we asked looks at the specific technical emphases that the Gates Foundation should have. This section will focus on four key themes which emerged from the interviews: the importance of implementation; a focus on teachers; building the capacity of country-level partners; and specific areas of interest within the field, particularly effective instructional models for improving FLN. We also consider some of the areas interviewees told us the sector should stop doing, such as ineffective teacher training, short program cycles, and imposing northern ideas.

Implementation quality was one of the most frequently cited topics across the interviews. This came up in several ways: first, understanding the leap between a policy on paper, and what happens on the ground, or as one interviewee put it, the need to *"narrow the gap between policy and implementation".* This also at times included a frustration with a focus on research rather than action: *"It's not straightforward, the learning will come from the doing. We know enough to move forward and do good work".* On top of this is the need for research to connect directly to program implementation, i.e. *"How do you get the evidence that you do have and get it thoughtfully incorporated into program designs?"*

A related theme was the importance of working directly with governments: *"If you don't work within the structures of government, there will be inefficiencies".* This included the need to embed change within systems, both to achieve impact at scale, and to ensure sustainability of programs *"Helping us improve systems and capacity will allow us to have the institutions that are strong in SSA."*

A focus on teachers, and on doing teacher training more effectively, emerged from several interviews. This included reflections on the need to acknowledge the professional status of teachers, and to engage and empower them, as well as considerations around the teacher workforce. Teacher training was also a topic which came up repeatedly, particularly the need to rethink how professional development is conducted, moving away from ineffective models: as one interviewee pointed out: *"Supporting teachers,*

training teachers is essential to scale". This connects to recent research (Popova, Evans, Breeding, & Arancibia, 2021) which demonstrated that more effective in-service training programs included specific features that were not typically available in the vast majority of teacher training programs. These specific teacher training characteristics include a link between training participation and career progression and incentives, focusing on training on specific subjects rather than generalized training, and opportunities for teachers to practice new skills during the training. It is worth emphasizing that these teacher training features were less likely to be present in their sample of at-scale teacher professional development programs. So, while we know that effective teacher teaching is important, and we have a good idea about what does (and doesn't) work for professional development, there is a clear need for substantially more attention to the features of in-service training programs and to the coaching support that teachers need after those trainings.

In addition to implementation and teachers, there was clear enthusiasm across our interviews for working directly with, and building up the capacity of, local organizations in LMICs. We know that organizations based in and staffed by experts from the countries we aim to serve have deep knowledge of the context and are far too often overlooked by donor funding. Collaborating with local institutions has the potential for greater and longer lasting impact, through building supportive relationships with decisionmakers, and opportunities to disseminate findings more effectively. Strengthening local institutions was also highlighted as a key piece of building research ecosystems of the future and supporting the next generation of scholars. One interviewee noted the need to *"Invest in building the capacity of the next generation of African researchers".* Within the Global Education team, we are excited to partner with, and learn from, strong partners based in India and Sub-Saharan Africa working in FLN. I am starting from a position of real respect and appreciation for the many local partners that we have seen do international quality technical support, advocacy and research. These partners include (but are not limited to) many of our grantees: Central Square Foundation, Language and Learning Foundation, the PAL Network, the African School of Economics, Human Capital Africa and CONFEMEN. We are also looking forward to learning from other grantmakers and partners in the sector who already have substantial positive experiences of prioritizing collaboration with local partners.[1]

Finally, we heard excitement around a range of specific focus areas within education. These areas are connected to FLN and were often described as methods to invest in more to make FLN implementation work better. This included interest in approaches such as structured pedagogy, and teaching at the right level, to achieve improvements in learning outcomes at scale. This aligns with growing emphasis in the sector on the importance of focusing on effective pedagogy, with these approaches highlighted in the Global Education Evidence Advisory Panel report (2020) and UNICEF's FLN Hub (UNICEF, n.d.). Pedagogy, instructional quality, and considerations of how new methods will be implemented by the typical, busy, teacher in a rural classroom are paramount considerations when we think about what to invest in.

When asked about interesting, innovative, or scalable areas within the sector, the conversations also uncovered a wide range of interesting connections, complementarities and adjacencies to FLN. Many colleagues are working within early childhood development, upper primary, and secondary; focusing on skills that go beyond FLN; embedding education technology into instructional improvement; supporting the mid level civil servants so fundamental to any program working well at scale; or thinking about the specific barriers faced by girls. These are essential and important areas of focus, and rather than being a

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[1] See for example (Schmidt, Ansah, Mendizabal, Singh, & Ruto, 2021)

distinct focus area, we understand FLN as a key building block in the wider Sustainable Development Goal 4 agenda - getting FLN right will be key to supporting the rest of the system to work well. Skipping these basic skills will create a structure too unsteady to build from.

As noted above, teacher training emerged across several interviews, and in particular an emphasis on moving away from the types of less effective teacher training, such as cascade models. We also heard about the challenges of short program cycles "*The short sprints don't work*", and to consider longer term funding to support organizational sustainability: *"Build the ownership and capacity of the people with the capacity and mandate for the systems over the long run. How do you work in a way that builds their capacity rather than takes it away."*

A final area of critique for the sector was around the imposition of Western or Northern ideas on actors in the global South. As one interviewee put it, *"We should stop pushing an agenda for education development that is defined by the North".* This connects to the analysis above around building the capacity of local organizations and on using our convening role to amplify the critical ideas that already exist in Sub-Saharan Africa and India. Recognizing and amplifying the expertise of local partners is something I am passionate about, as I explore in more detail in the next section.

4) Who are the technically strong local education partners in Sub-Saharan Africa?

In my previous work I had the opportunity to collaborate with many education colleagues and organizations across Sub-Saharan Africa, so I know from first-hand experience that there are numerous talented and committed individuals working in this space. Unfortunately, in both education research and implementation, African partners are underrepresented not only as funding recipients, but also as active participants in discussions around how best to improve education outcomes on the continent. Increasing the visibility of strong local partners working on FLN, and identifying new partners to work with, was a key area of interest in these interviews. I wanted to know what high quality local partners there were that I had not met before.

While many interviewees gave enthusiastic recommendations and reviews of collaborating with local partners, the names of the same small number of organizations came up multiple times. We need to do a better job of connecting with organizations working in FLN across the continent, and listening closely to partners to learn about the barriers and opportunities in working in this space. The list of organizations that respondents came up with was not only relatively short, it was also biased towards Anglophone countries – very few organizations based in Francophone or Lusophone countries were identified. We need to pay particular attention to the challenges faced by organizations who do not work in English, as the majority of children in Sub-Saharan Africa who have not met learning benchmarks for FLN are outside of Anglophone countries. Finally, we also need to be careful about not overburdening the group of strong partners we are all excited to work with – for example by coordinating better and sharing notes across funders, and being respectful about grantee time and resources.

Conclusion

This initial set of conversations offered a fascinating view of the work of individuals and organizations across the sector, showcasing the important task that the donors play in international education. While the discussions were wide-ranging and thought-provoking, it was striking how many similar themes

emerged, as well as the palpable excitement and enthusiasm that spanned across colleagues working on many disparate but connected areas. This is an exciting time to be working in education, with increasing awareness of the importance of learning, a growing knowledge base on effective instructional practices, and a recognition that the sector needs to move towards supporting and amplifying the talent and expertise of our colleagues in Africa.

However, underpinning this excitement is a reminder of the urgency of the learning crisis, and the injustice of a status quo where 9 in 10 children in Sub-Saharan Africa will not learn to read by the age of 10. Compounding this is the emerging evidence of learning losses from the pandemic, which have fallen hardest on the poorest students, as well as increasing school dropout rates for older children (Moscoviz & Evans, 2022).

In terms of what is next for the Global Education team at the foundation, supporting the good work and ideas of our partners in FLN will continue to be at the core of all that we do. As part of this FLN focus, we are keen to work on better supporting teachers to deliver FLN, and to increasingly integrate technical expertise around the details of classroom pedagogy into our programming. We also expect to shift our emphasis from identifying what methods work to improve FLN, to more research and public goods designed to increase our ability to respond to inevitable implementation challenges and considering how to apply these learnings within and through government systems. At the heart of our work will be an increasing emphasis on understanding how learning outcomes can be increased at scale in primary schools, and the steps we need to take to get there.

Note: Dr Benjamin Piper is the Director of Global Education at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and previously served as Senior Director for Africa education at RTI International. The foundation is one of the funders of the RISE program.

Acknowledgements

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