Unit 8: The system enablers of instruction

Teaching is at the heart of education systems, and is of central importance to determining how much children learn. However, there are multiple system-level components that directly shape teaching (as distinct from the teacher-level factors covered in Unit 7) and determine whether it is effective or not. These core “instructional components” include children’s learning levels, curriculum, assessment, and instructional support (i.e. textbooks, lesson plans, and teacher training or coaching).

Many education reform efforts seek to improve teaching by acting on a single instructional component at a time. However, there is increasing evidence that this piecemeal approach is inadequate to improve learning outcomes. Instead, there is a need to increase attention toward coherence across (between) instructional components.

To take a negative example, the literature on “overambitious curricula” highlights the mismatch between curricula and children’s learning levels in many contexts, and the associated risk that children are left behind and unable to catchup as the curriculum advances faster than they can learn. Conversely, many of the most promising examples of systems change that have increased learning at-scale have brought about greater coherence between instructional components.

We will discuss tools to measure coherence between various instructional components (such as the Surveys of Enacted Curriculum). We will also explore influential contemporary case studies that have successfully improved instructional coherence (i.e. TARL), and compare and contrast the distinct approaches these programs take even as they pursue a similar goal.

After completing the unit, students should:

• Understand the concept of ‘instructional components’ and ‘instructional coherence’
• Be able to provide diverse examples of instructional coherence, and interpret real-world case studies through the lens of instructional (in)coherence
• Be able to marshall theoretical and empirical evidence around the impact of “overambitious curricula”, and the importance of adapting instruction to childrens’ learning levels

Required Readings


Further Readings

Case Studies of Improved Instructional Coherence


Overambitious curricula


Pedagogical Production Function


Instructional incoherence and Covid learning loss