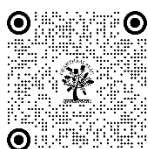


INCLUSIVE AND EQUITABLE LITERACY AND NUMERACY PRACTICES AT FOUNDATIONAL STAGE: GLOBAL AND COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This study is the output of the minor research project on FLN received by IITE Gujarat. It reviews the progression of Foundational Literacy, Language and Numeracy practices through content analysis of literature in the form of educational regulatory documents, policy briefs, dataset tracking the progress, need analysis, baseline-endline and assessment reports. The study underscores the significance and evolving role of foundational learning both now and in the future in preparing students for the complexities of the modern world offering an inclusive and equitable perspective on effective practices exploring how literacy, language, and numeracy strengthened through diverse educational initiatives and interventions. It also identifies the conditions for Foundational Literacy and Numeracy delivery at grassroots level for widespread adoption across three distinct categories of nations: developed, developing, and underdeveloped countries aiming to provide insights into their historical development and social contexts shaping the learning practices globally along with the role of the parent-community integration and involvement. The study underlines the accountability of Governments and education stakeholders worldwide specifically in high-income, middle-income, and low-income countries to endorse their major initiatives ensuring all children, including the most marginalized, develop necessary foundational skills in alignment with Sustainable Development Goals (SDG-4). While doing background briefing of different projects and programs at international and national level, few case-studies have been elaborated that emphasize the current state of FLN in various regions providing a broad perspective on foundational learning study across different educational contexts, often extending beyond traditional notions of basic education and existing systems.

Keywords: Inclusive Practices, Foundational Literacy, Language and Numeracy, Learning Crisis, Global And Comparative Perspectives

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. "SKILLS BEGET SKILLS"

The above phrase means that skills acquired early in life make it easier to learn more skills later in life because skills are cumulative and do not inevitably disappear over time.

In recent decades, a growing number of international organizations have called on governments to reform their education systems to embrace inclusive practices. Notably, the World Health Organization, the Global Partnership for Education, and various United Nations agencies have highlighted its value from educational, social, economic, and human rights perspectives (Jodi & Bian, 2023). A central tenet is the prioritization of primary education, as future learning hinges on the development of foundational literacy and numeracy skills during the early grades. While all levels of education are important, building these core competencies at the primary level is essential for long-term academic success (Shawar & Shiffman, 2016). SDG-4 focuses on ensuring that all learners, regardless of their social, economic, or personal differences, can succeed without fear of discrimination, punishment, or favouritism.

Foundational learning is a fundamental human right and essential for providing opportunities, life choices, and dignity. The World Bank introduced the term “learning poverty” to analyse the gap in quality education. Currently, 90% of children in low-income countries cannot read and understand simple texts by the end of primary school, compared to 90% in high-income countries who can. Within countries, marginalized children are disproportionately affected. The global learning crisis persists despite increased access to schooling in recent decades. Simulations indicate that learning poverty rose from 57% to 70% in low- and middle-income countries between 2019 and 2022 (World bank, 2022). The Commitment to Action (CtA) on Foundational Learning is a global initiative focused on ensuring that all children, especially the most marginalized, achieve basic educational skills. It aims to drive transformative changes in education, secure high-level political and organizational support, and align with SDG-4 targets for quality education, address global educational inequities (UNICEF, 2022). Foundational Learning Compact (FLC) was launched to help countries achieve learning targets, with an initial group of ten governments, including Brazil, Kenya, and Nigeria (World Bank Group, 2022). The World Bank's Global Initiative aims to overhaul education systems to equip every child with essential skills for future success.

Hence, the present study highpoints global initiatives launched or coordinated by the World Bank, UNICEF, USAID, UNESCO such as The Commitment to Action, Foundational learning compact, Global education program, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation that involves partner countries pledging to ensure that all children achieve foundational learning by age ten and to reduce learning poverty by half by 2030. The study also provides an overview of the characteristics and strengths of primary education in developed, developing and underdeveloped countries to recognize the differences and similarities in educational progress and challenges within these regions (UNICEF Global database 2022).

The study progressed keeping in mind the following research questions:

- What is the role of government and international organizations across the nations joining efforts to ensure the fundamental education of all children?
- What are the critical considerations regarding the inclusive and equitable pedagogical and assessment practices in the field of foundational learning?
- What does the literature and data reflect on the current state of progress in foundational skills in terms of the results of programmes and projects of various countries at primary stages?

1.2. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The primary objective of the study is stated as under:

To review global best practices in literacy, language and numeracy intended towards learning outcomes at foundational stages.

2. METHOD OF STUDY

The study employed document analysis and content analysis to examine educational content regulating documents and relevant literature exploring Foundational Learning within the global context of SDGs and quality education. The research focused on analysing the most important planning documents that influence the educational process:

Global State of Inclusion in Education. Policy brief 2023; Foundational Learning in The Global Education Agenda 2016.; Briefing Note CtA for Foundational Learning – 2022; State of Global Learning Poverty: 2022; FLC Program, 2022; Effective and inclusive practices in family literacy, language, and numeracy, 2008; Foundational Learning: Debates and Praxes, 2024; Lessons from PISA for Japan Report. 2012; Recover Learning & Rebuild Education in ASEAN Roundtable Policy Brief, 2022; South Asia Tracking Progress on Foundational Learning: Rapid analysis, 2023; Literacy, Language and Learning Initiative. Rwandan Schools: Endline Report 2017; Learning Profiles in 18 Countries. RISE 2021.

The three sections classified in this study explores the state of foundational education in developed, developing and underdeveloped countries, highlighting the unique challenges and progress in each context as presented below:

3. FOUNDATIONAL EDUCATION IN DEVELOPED NATIONS

The developed nations generally have advanced educational systems characterized by established infrastructure, skilled educators, comprehensive curricula, and high enrolment rates. Here, primary education focuses on foundational skills essential for productivity, economic growth, and daily life, recognizing the significant role of family contributions to these skills. These initiatives aim to boost children's reading, writing, socio-emotional skills by enhancing parents' literacy and involving them in their children's education. The concept of 'family literacy' recognizes and builds upon existing literacy activities within families, where interaction between older family members and children supports mutual learning. These programmes integrate two key strands: early childhood education and adult and community education, employ ORIM Framework, which emphasizes: Opportunities: to children for literacy development; Recognition: of children's literacy practices; Interaction: with children to develop their literacy skills; Modelling: for children to emulate. In the mid-1990s, family literacy projects were introduced, emphasizing the importance of family-community interaction in educational settings as below in Table 1:

Table 1: Programmes for Family Literacy, Language and Numeracy (FLLN)

European Countries	FLLN Projects
Latvia	School 2030
Sheffield	Raising Early Achievement in Literacy (REAL)
Birmingham	Bookstart
Turkey	Mother-Child Education Program (MOCEP)
Oxford	Peers Early Education Partnership (Foundation PEEP)
Chicago	FLAME (Family Literacy), Quality in Family Literacy (QualiFLY)
Malta	Parent Empowerment for Family Literacy Project (PEFaL)
New Zealand	Manukau Family Literacy Program (MFLP)
Canada	Literacy and Parenting Skills (LAPS)
Finland	Lukuinto (Joy of Reading), LEKSA (Learning Skills and Abilities)
USA	Math And Parent Partnerships (MAPPS)
UK	Sure Start
South Africa	Learning for Living Project
Japan	Early Grade Learning Assessment (EGLA)

Source: FLLN Report, 2008

The FLLN practices of developed countries, which have been implementing these projects to integrate literacy, language, and numeracy with broader parenting practices, supports community involvement, health, and child-rearing. These practices have significantly enhanced children education effectively by valuing home literacies and languages, adopting an inclusive approach to community literacy, and developing strong community partnerships. The practices offer parents, particularly mothers, a platform to connect with peers, build self-esteem through improved parenting skills, and engage more fully in daily life. The programme focuses on both positive and negative discipline practices, providing strategies for enlightened discipline, such as attentive parenting and creating suitable learning environments. This approach has likely boosted mothers' self-esteem. The true value of family literacy and numeracy programmes lies in fostering constructive dialogue and peer interaction. Success has been particularly noted in programmes where adults exchanged ideas on childcare and life skills. Follow-up surveys showed that children's literacy and numeracy scores, particularly among girls, improved significantly. This may be attributed to girls' early language development strengths or the influence of mothers as role models. FLLN programmes have become a well-established component of educational systems in several countries and continue to expand. The sessions also covered topics such as boosting children's self-esteem, positive discipline, anger management, communication and listening skills, nutrition, safety, conflict management, and understanding family dynamics and child development stages.

Similarly, in Japan, a mother's success is often linked to her role in supporting her children's education. Japanese parents are highly committed to their children's learning, both before and during school. Ranked high on PISA, results show that Japanese students who attend early childhood education perform significantly better than those who do not. A key factor in Japan's educational success is the belief that all children can achieve, resulting in a relatively small influence of social background on educational outcomes (Lessons from PISA).

4. FOUNDATIONAL EDUCATION IN DEVELOPING NATIONS

In many lower-income and lower-middle-income countries, including parts of Africa and Asia, cognitive development often falls short of international standards. Less than 60% of children in low-income countries and about 70% in lower-middle-income countries complete primary school. Achieving basic literacy and numeracy skills typically takes nearly six years, hindered by barriers such as financial constraints, superstitions, community prejudices, and caste issues as a result of which only 30% adults complete primary education.

The RAPID Framework, developed by UNICEF, aims to monitor, and promote foundational learning for all children in selected Asian countries. According to UNICEF's 2023 pulse survey, which covered low and middle-income countries including India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Bhutan, and Nepal, progress in FLN is currently at an early stage, highlighting that these countries have begun implementing actions under the RAPID Framework with projects as below (refer Table 2):

Table 2: Programmes for Foundational Literacy and Numeracy

Asian Countries	FLN Projects
India	Foundational Learning Study
Bangladesh	National Student Assessments
Sri Lanka	National learning Assessments
Pakistan	Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP), Citizen-led assessment
Afghanistan	Community-based education programme
Bhutan	National learning assessments
Nepal	Condensed curriculum, Welcome to School campaigns, Recovery and Accelerated Learning Plan

Source: Rapid Analysis, 2023

The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Region, informed further efforts are needed to advance foundational learning effectively under Recover Learning and Rebuild Education Report (2022). This policy brief encapsulates the key discussion points from a roundtable involving representatives from ten member states: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. The discussions and subsequent policy recommendations are organized under three overarching themes that reflect the diverse challenges faced by the education systems in these countries, innovative approaches that have been adopted for teachers and other educational stakeholders like parents and community to integrate these practices into their daily routines as well as the inventive and proactive solutions they have implemented over the past two years:

- Learning Loss and Accelerated Learning
- Access to Education
- Building Education System Resilience

5. GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES IN INDIA

Despite various Indian government initiatives like "Shining India" and "Digital India," these efforts frequently struggle with deep-rooted challenges, leading to low completion rates and substandard educational outcomes. India could revolutionize its primary education system and become a global leader by 2047 by envisioning "Viksit Bharat @ 2047" establishing a robust foundation for lifelong learning of every child receiving exceptional primary education. This will equip them to navigate future challenges and seize emerging opportunities, positioning India at the forefront of educational excellence. The National Mission on Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) is a programme by the Ministry of Education to ensure that all children in India achieve basic literacy and numeracy skills. Other such initiatives were NIPUN Bharat, National Guidelines and Implementation Framework on Equitable and Inclusive Education (NGIFEIE), National Curriculum Framework-Foundational Stage (NCF-FS). NGIFEIE serve as a roadmap for implementing the National Education Policy 2020 through the Samagra Shiksha Scheme, guide states in developing annual work plans to promote equitable and inclusive education at the ground level. The scheme 2.0 aligns with the SDGs for Education and the National Education Policy 2020 covering all levels of school education from pre-school to class XII, it integrates previous schemes like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA), and Teacher Education (TE), supporting 1.16 million schools, over 156 million students, and 5.7 million teachers (DSEL).

The government has started various initiatives to transform classrooms with various resources and providing necessary tools and support to teachers to eventually help students meet the learning objectives, the detailed plans of few states are given as below:

5.1. GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES AT STATE LEVEL

In India, various states have implemented programmes to improve fundamental skills among children. Some notable examples are listed as below:

Table 3: State wise Programmes for Foundational Literacy and Numeracy in India

Indian States	Projects
Uttar Pradesh (UP)	UP Hai Taiyar, Mission Prerna Program, Graded Learning Programme; UP Education for All
Uttarakhand	Bal Vatikas
Goa	Vidya Pravesh
Maharashtra	Leadership for equity
Tamil Nadu	Ennum Ezhuthum; Illam Thedi Kalvi
Karnataka	Kalika Chetarike; Karnataka Learning Partnership
Telangana	Saamarthyala Saadhana Maasotsvam Remedial Teaching Programme (3Rs Programme) Competencies Achievement Fortnight (CAF Programme)
West Bengal	Shishu Aloy; Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) West Bengal School Education Department's Programme
Assam	Nipun Axom Mission
Madhya Pradesh	Mission Ankur; Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya
Kerala	Pratham's Read India Programme; Kerala Literacy Mission

Source: FLN report, IFC, 2023

The above programmes vary in their approaches, from community-based initiatives to government-led schemes and are designed to address the specific educational needs of their regions. Each state in India is coming up with its own creative methods and projects to ensure that all students achieve basic literacy and numeracy skills by the school year 2026-27. This means that every state is working on different ideas to make sure all children learn the essential skills they need for their education by that deadline.

- The Government of Uttar Pradesh organized an event called “UP Hai Taiyar” (2022) Readiness of UP on NIPUN Bharat Mission aimed to raise awareness to improve basic reading and math skills for children in grades 1 to 3.
- The Government of Uttarakhand has begun implementing the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 by starting “Bal Vatikas” at Anganwadi centers across the state. These centers aim to strengthen early childhood education and foundational learning.
- Goa introduced a new book called “Vidya Pravesh” (2022) as part of the NIPUN Bharat program to help improve students' performance in mathematics.
- “Leadership for Equity” collaborates with SCERT Maharashtra to implement a comprehensive statewide initiative designed to achieve FLN objectives for all students in the state, in alignment with the NIPUN Bharat guidelines introduced in 2021.
- The government of Tamil Nadu started a programme called “Ennum Ezhuthum” to help students who have fallen behind in their early education due to the pandemic from Grades 1 to 3 in government schools across the state.
- The Government of Karnataka introduced a comprehensive learning programme called “Kalika Chetarike” (2022) to address learning disruptions caused by the pandemic and other factors to tackle different educational needs in three phases.
- The Government of Punjab launched an initiative called ‘Padho Punjab Padhao Punjab’ to improve the learning outcome of the children in their foundational years.

- The Telangana School Education Department celebrated the "Month of Quality Achievement" (Saamarthya Saadhan Maasotsvam, 2023) which focuses on the Attainment of Basic Competencies (ABC) for students in Classes 3-8. Baseline tests have been created to assess these competencies.
- The West Bengal government launched "Shishu Aloy" initiative (2015), a model ICDS centre. Some of the strategies were: Khelte Khelte Shekha school readiness; Community participation; Summer literacy camp; Mother literacy programme (Ghosh, 2021).
- "Nipun Axom Mission" (2021) by Government of Assam, in alignment with NIPUN Bharat include creating awareness through videos and a theme song, displaying the Nipun Bharat- Pledge, Lakshya, Logo in schools, providing printed materials and guidelines.
- "Mission Ankur" in Madhya Pradesh has integrated Assessment-Informed Instruction (A-i-i) into lesson plans, worksheets, and weekly structures with Central Square Foundation (CSF), working with academic partners in Mission Prerna (CSF, 2022).

The above points lead to the fact that the states have begun efforts to translate the Developmental Goal-wise Key Competencies and Learning Outcomes into various regional languages as needed, with the involvement of experts. Given the challenges faced by UP, one of the most educationally underserved states, significant and vigorous initiatives have been undertaken to address these issues as mentioned in detail below:

Mission Prerna Programme in UP is working on improving the quality of education in its 150,000 primary schools aims to ensure that all its 12 million students achieve basic reading and math skills by 2022. Specific goals for reading and math skills are outlined in a document called 'Prerna Lakshya.' A diagnostic study was conducted to analyse student learning levels, and the teaching materials used in classrooms. The study identified several key issues with content and existing classroom materials. Based on the findings, Mission Prerna developed a comprehensive academic strategy to address these issues. New interventions and materials were created to make classrooms more effective, focusing on identified challenges as below:

- 1) Generating print-rich environments for literacy skills.
- 2) Manipulatives such as coins or blocks to grasp abstract math concepts.
- 3) Graded reading books for early learners' engagement in learning.
- 4) Introducing teachers' guide and daily lesson plans.
- 5) Hosting live sessions with teachers on YouTube.

By focusing on these methods, the mission is working towards its goal of universal FLN, helping students gain the necessary skills to succeed (CSF, 2020).

6. FOUNDATIONAL EDUCATION IN UNDER-DEVELOPED NATIONS

Underdeveloped nations face critical shortages in meeting basic human needs, such as food, health, shelter, and literacy, which perpetuate poverty and impede overall development. They are bound to employ strategies to improve the educational experience for children in these regions as outlined in the following Literacy, Language, and Learning (L3) Initiative of Rwanda (2016):

Rwanda classified as developing country, aspires to become a Middle-Income Country by 2035, considered as least developed according to UN. L3 funded by USAID and led by the Education Development Center, aimed to enhance language and math skills for early grade learners in Rwanda. It supported the Rwandan Ministry of Education in implementing a comprehensive early literacy and math program, including the transition to English instruction in P4. The initiative conducted annual assessments to measure progress, using standards developed by Rwandan experts. The endline assessment, which included 2,387 learners and 60 schools, was compared to baseline results to evaluate improvements. After two years of the L3 intervention, early grade learners (P1-P3) demonstrated notable improvements in reading performance, fluency, and comprehension. The percentage of P1-P3 students who could not read a single word dropped by 7-10% from baseline to endline. Additionally, there was a significant reduction in zero scores.

In a similar study, Research on Improving Systems of Education (RISE), an international research programme investigating how education systems can overcome learning crisis with Country Research Teams in 18 countries

(Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Tanzania, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Congo) reflect the depth of the learning crisis in many countries, and highlight the need for early intervention (Silberstein, 2021).

7. GLOBAL STATE OF FLN SKILLS

The UNICEF Global Database of FLN Skills (FLS-2022) offers an in-depth analysis of how children in various countries are performing in fundamental reading and numeracy skills. The data includes specific information on their levels in three distinct categories based on the developmental status and income levels of the nations as least developed, developing, and most developed countries, highlighting a significant educational disparity between regions as below:

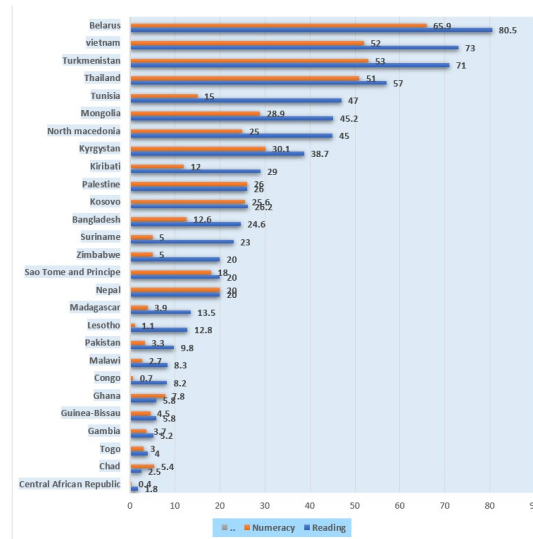


Figure1: UNICEF Global Database Country wise

The above figure depicts the reading and numeracy data of 27 countries, the dataset (starting from the bottom) encompasses 16 least developed countries, where children's proficiency in reading ranges from 24% to 1% and numeracy proficiency ranges from 12% to 0.4%. Bangladesh exhibits the highest proficiency within this group with 24.6% in reading and 12.6% in numeracy. Nepal at 20%, showing a balanced but modest achievement. Central African Republic is at the lowest proficiency rates with 1.8% in reading and 0.4% in numeracy. The middle section of the dataset represents 9 developing nations with lower-middle to upper-middle incomes, showing a significant improvement in literacy and numeracy skills compared to least developed nations. Vietnam leads this group with 73% proficiency in reading and 52% in numeracy. The top-most part of the dataset includes two high-income, highly developed countries, where proficiency rates in foundational skills are exceptionally high. Belarus shows outstanding proficiency with 80.5% in reading and 65.9% in numeracy and another North Macedonia with 25% in numeracy and 45% in reading.

Hence, based on above discussions it can be said that:

- Children in the least developed countries struggle with low levels of reading and numeracy proficiency. Bangladesh and Nepal, among the least developed, show some progress in foundational education but still need further development.
- In contrast, those in developing and developed nations generally perform better due to higher income, improved educational resources, and more effective systems.
- In developing countries like Vietnam, higher proficiency rates reflect successful educational strategies that could serve as models for others.
- Most developed countries, such as Belarus, achieve high proficiency levels, demonstrating the advantages of robust educational infrastructure. North Macedonia, while developed, shows reading and numeracy levels comparable to Mongolia and lower than Thailand.
- The data suggest that progress in numeracy scores were lower as compared to literacy scores within the countries.

8. CONCLUSION

“If we teach today’s children the way we were taught in the past, we are depriving them of their future.”

This timeless quote from American educator Dewey, first written in the early 20th century, remains just as relevant and insightful today. However, the best practices as mentioned from various countries gives clarity on inclusive approach in early childhood education, draw attention to the importance of integrating moral and cultural education while actively involving parents and community. These comprehensive practices support an idea that while many education systems globally have implemented instructional and assessment-led reforms to measure student learning outcomes, merely measuring learning is not enough. For assessments to effectively inform instruction and enhance learning outcomes, they must lead to actionable changes. The review highlights a noteworthy trend of literacy and numeracy practices, suggesting a range of oral, aural, numeracy, reading, and writing drive for foundational stage learners. However, the strategies should promote partnerships between families, schools, and other stakeholders. Schools need to engage in foundational literacy and numeracy efforts and support initiatives led by others.

The study concludes that building connections between literacy and numeracy programmes and community organizations is essential to raise awareness at foundational stage. Therefore, it is crucial to support teachers in tailoring their classroom practices to meet the specific learning needs of their students. These understandings highlight the urgent need for targeted educational interventions and support, particularly in the least developed countries, to bridge the proficiency gap and ensure equitable education for all children.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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