IMPROVING EDUCATION QUALITY IN SOUTH ASIA (II):
PLACING LEARNING AT THE CENTRE
IMPROVING EDUCATION QUALITY IN SOUTH ASIA (II):
PLACING LEARNING AT THE CENTRE
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Sincere thanks goes to the 8 UNICEF South Asia Country Offices, who were willing to reflect and share their insights over skype or email on the difficult question of how to improve learning in South Asia. Thanks goes also to various UNICEF partners interviewed who were also willing to lend their thinking to this complex question.

Special thanks goes to Anne Bernard, who helped do the groundwork for this process of UNICEF South Asia’s attempt to place learning at the centre: by helping do thoughtful research and to identify outliers impacting learning, and travelling to various South Asia Country Offices to facilitate reflection exercises on how to improve learning.

This project was made possible by the Education Section of UNICEF’s Regional Office for South Asia, especially Ivan Coursac, as well as Urmila Sarkar and Jim Ackers. Their willingness to prioritise learning for South Asia’s education systems as well as for their own work shows a hopeful example of UNICEF’s seriousness in placing learning at the centre of its programming. Any errors in this report are my own.

Suzana Brinkmann, PhD
Consultant, UNICEF ROSA
September 2019
On my arrival at the UNICEF South Asia Regional Office in September 2019 I was delighted to see that substantive work had been commissioned by my predecessor, Urmila Sarkar and Ivan Coursac to try to address what is now termed ‘The Learning Crisis’ and to re-strategise around how UNICEF can contribute to this critical endeavor. I am particularly interested in this area having worked on national teacher education systems in Kenya and Tanzania and on national standards based on Child Friendly Schools in various other countries. The fact that UNICEF also launched its new Global Education Strategy in 2019 was highly serendipitous. The team in ROSA was already working on what I really wanted to do!

Addressing learning outcomes has always been a challenge. The non-expert audience often seeks simple answers to very complex problems. Some agencies support holistic approaches, as was the case with the ‘school effectiveness’ approaches in the late 1990 and early 2000s. These remain relevant today in terms of their systematic approach. Some agencies have asked questions like: ‘Should we invest in textbooks or teachers?’; others cite research that teacher training has no effect on learning outcomes and focus on specific interventions rather than the bigger picture. Some focus on accountability; others argue that incentivizing teachers is the answer. Some work at the national level; others at the micro level and claim to have found the ‘Holy Grail’, and shake their heads because the government cannot take their solution to scale. Some see innovation and technology as irrelevant; others see it as the new Holy Grail. Major donor agencies have dismissed analytical reports as unfocussed if they show how complex it is to enhance learning outcomes at scale and within short time-frames.

So Suzana Brinkmann was setting out on a complex and potentially hazardous journey when she agreed to support our analysis of Education Quality in South Asia. The first part of that journey is captured in the Phase 1 report where she mapped out the interventions that UNICEF has been engaging in in South Asia during the previous decade. The interventions initially all contained two common words: ‘Child’ + ‘Friendly’ – Child-Friendly Schools, Child-Friendly Education; Child-Friendly Education Systems. Suzana has now proposed ‘Child-friendly Learning Systems’. Her findings are that in many countries these initiatives enhanced equity, gender equality and cross-sectoral collaboration and promoted standards at the school and national levels, but did not do enough to improve actual learning. These findings resonate well with what I have seen in my former regions – Eastern and Southern Africa, and East Asia and the Pacific (where the Child Friendly Schools Initiative first took root in 1998). Indeed, the UNICEF Education Strategy 2019-2030 states: “It is important to transition from ‘Child Friendly Schools’ to ‘child friendly systems’, which will ensure wider support to the improvement of education quality.” (pg. 38)

The period between 1998 and 2020 has also seen a very significant shift in how UNICEF engages in education programming. We have moved from supporting initiatives at the sub-national level for proposed national scale-up (i.e. downstream work), to supporting sector analyses, policies and plans at the national level (i.e. upstream work). Hence the shift in nomenclature from Child Friendly Schools to Child Friendly Education Systems in the UNICEF Education Strategy. We are now often a key partner in terms of sector co-ordination, including acting as the Co-ordinating Agency in countries part of the Global Partnership for Education (GPE). Most countries in ROSA are members of GPE.
We are very much engaged in major initiatives around assessment at national, regional and global levels. This includes the Learning Assessment Platform in ROSA. We also work in emergency situations to try to ensure that children and adolescents can still fulfill their right to learn, from accelerated learning programmes in Afghanistan to supporting Learning Centres for the Rohingya community in Cox’s bazaar. But we need to focus more on creating the conditions for effective learning, including teacher education through continuous professional development linked to teacher incentives (not necessarily only financial as Suzana reports), which shape the positive mindsets needed for education improvement to take place.

Learning is now rightly at the apex of UNICEF’s global strategy and the scope of our engagement has broadened to include secondary-aged children, and has broadened from learning and skills to skills and employability. Our focus on early learning has also expanded greatly.

So this report is highly fortuitous in its timing. It asks what have we learnt from our own past engagement as an organization, it also draws on a wide literature about what works when focusing on learning and not just schooling; it considers the specificity of the context here in South Asia, also recognizing divergence within that context, which is fine as our role is to support government initiatives and adapt to the contextual realities which make the world such an interesting place.

The report proposes an approach which is coherent and holistic and yet focused on UNICEF’s comparative advantage. It discusses how UNICEF can enhance its capacity in this critical area of engagement. It discusses and proposes two key approaches which are framed by the ‘4 Es’ and the ‘TEAM’ approach.

I am very grateful to Suzana and all the UNICEF colleagues that have contributed to the many ideas and strategic thoughts that these two documents have generated, not least to Ivan Coursac whose vision has shaped the process. These documents will help steer us as an agency in South Asia, and perhaps indeed beyond, in our efforts to identify and employ strategies, based on relevant evidence, that will help us address this learning crisis.

In so doing we will help generate the minds that this region needs to drive it forward in its search for increased prosperity, equality, peaceful co-existence and sustainable development. Our mission is critical as learning is core to the achievement of the SDGs as a whole.

Jim Ackers
Regional Education Adviser
for UNICEF South Asia
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Globally, the biggest educational challenge faced by developing countries is that even when in school, many children are simply not learning. This led UNICEF’s Regional Office for South Asia (ROSA) to undertake a mapping in 2017-18 to help review and recommend how to strengthen UNICEF’s quality programming in South Asia, as well as a follow-up Phase 2 in 2018-19 to think through how to implement these findings. The present Phase 2 report seeks to help UNICEF teams in South Asia operationalise how they could help align systems towards improving learning for every child – which becomes especially relevant in light of UNICEF’s global education focus in 2019-2030 to ensure every child learns. Phase 2 involved facilitating reflection by UNICEF teams on how to improve quality programming (through on-site workshops and skype or email discussions), analyzing available research on improving learning in developing countries, and examining outliers from South Asia who have demonstrated impact on learning, in order to glean lessons for efforts to improve learning. The key messages that emerged in Phase 2 are summarised below.

1. Two shifts are needed in UNICEF’s quality programming: learning + systems thinking

Phase 2 aimed to support UNICEF South Asia education teams to implement two key findings from the Quality Mapping: to think through what it would look like to place learning at the centre of its efforts, and how to use systems thinking principles to plan strategically for improving learning. In terms of what are the practical implications of applying a ‘learning lens’ to quality programming, this would involve strengthening the alignment of all educational inputs and actors squarely on ensuring equitable learning for every child. This would include using UNICEF’s strategic position in Global Partnership for Education (GPE) countries or in sector planning to clarify in operational terms how particular interventions will work together in a coherent manner to directly contribute to improvements in learning processes and outcomes. In terms of key systems thinking principles applicable to UNICEF’s quality programming, adopting an agile learning approach for education planning in South Asia (i.e. that reflects systems thinking principles) would involve the following shifts:

- **Focus**: From trying to do many things to focusing on a few strategic learning-centred targets
- **Realistic**: From idealised to pragmatic planning, that factors in constraints, uncertainties, human nature, and possible unforeseen consequences
- **Systemic alignment**: From disconnected interventions, to a coherent attempt to strengthen all factors that impact learning
- **Innovative thinking**: From fixed to responsive planning, using systems and technologies to minimise barriers and increase impact
- **Incentives**: From promoting structures that incentivise exam results to ones incentivising learning
- **Learning from the best**: From pockets of high-impact innovations, to principles of successful scale-up and mainstreaming for different contexts

2. A starting point for a systemic approach to learning is understanding what is happening in the classroom, and what systems impact on this and may thus need strengthening.

What research shows can work to improve students’ learning outcomes is to change their learning processes: to change the nature of
teacher-student interactions in the classroom. A systemic approach to improving learning would begin with understanding the current nature of learning processes and outcomes, followed by a systemic analysis of the various factors impacting on this and that thus may need strengthening (e.g. teacher education, assessment, curriculum, textbooks, teacher support and monitoring systems). A sample systems map of various factors that typically impact learning processes and outcomes in South Asia is shown in Figure 1 (though this would need to be adapted to specific contexts).

In recent decades, UNICEF’s quality programming in South Asia has focused more on strengthening enabling school and systemic factors contributing to learning (though these factors still require strengthening to effectively align them towards improved learning – e.g. ensuring strong governance, institutional capacity, accountability, sufficiency of inputs and financing, etc.). But very little attention has been placed on core factors that can directly contribute to learning (which are applicable not only for student learning, but for learning at every level of the system). Impacting learning would require shifting from inputs to looking in a holistic manner at the systems impacting learning, and ensuring measures to strengthen both core factors and enabling school and systemic factors needed for effective learning.

3. Learning needs to be addressed in holistic yet implementable terms

A key challenge of shifting the focus to learning in South Asia is the lack of common understanding of what we mean by learning, that can be agreed upon by both implementers and experts.
Prioritising learning outcomes without also emphasizing learning processes could end up fuelling an already strong ‘exam culture’, placing greater pressure on both students and teachers to achieve higher grades on standardised exams that may not actually be accurate measures of holistic learning (which may be more accurately captured by more holistic assessment approaches). UNICEF can play a key role in promoting alignment of all inputs and actors towards the goal of holistic learning — broadly defined here to include both learning outcomes and processes, both academic and transferable skills, or at the foundational level both the 3Rs (reading, writing, arithmetic) and 4Es (enjoy, enquire, empathise, engage). The term ‘4Es’ was introduced in this report to capture key skills identified in UNICEF’s ‘Life Skills and Citizenship Education’ (LSCE) framework, but in terms that also capture desired learning processes, and applicable even at the primary level (see Table 1). These 4 principles capture how especially in the early years children learn academic skills like the 3Rs better through play or enjoyable exploratory experiences (i.e. the 4Es), and these would need to be adapted to make them applicable to different age groups (as per the life cycle approach), although the 4Es could apply in different forms to different age groups.

4. What research has found most helpful for improving learning outcomes aligns with 4 key principles captured in the acronym T-E-A-M.

Most of the principles underlying successful practices that emerged from analysis of research, CO efforts, and successful outliers, fit within 4 key principles captured by the acronym T-E-A-M:

1. TARGET STRATEGIC PRIORITIES: Align all educational actors around strategic, achievable goals (Learning-centred)
2. EMPOWER KEY PLAYERS (at the classroom level, this would mean teachers, parents, students) with the needed skills, motivation and autonomy so they can think together of new ways to best support learning for every child (Teacher-driven)
3. ASSESS & ADJUST CONTINUALLY: Strengthen creation and use of information (Evidence-informed)
4. MOST TO THE LEAST: Promote a democratic culture that gives priority to the least in age, ability, or status (Equity-lens)

These are key factors that research has shown can help contribute to shifts in both learning outcomes and processes, and that are applicable for promoting learning in all levels or organizations in the system (classrooms, government systems, and UNICEF teams).

The ‘4Es’ of holistic learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>4 Es</th>
<th>Learning goals (what we want children to think)</th>
<th>Learning processes</th>
<th>LSCE skills</th>
<th>LSCE goals (and UNESCO 4 pillars)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enjoy</td>
<td>I love learning!</td>
<td>Kids have fun together and enjoy the process of learning</td>
<td>Participation, communication, cooperation</td>
<td>Learning (Learning to know)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explore</td>
<td>Why are things this way?</td>
<td>Kids have freedom to ask questions and explore their curiosity to discover answers for themselves</td>
<td>Critical thinking, decision-making, problem-solving</td>
<td>Personal empowerment (Learning to be)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathise</td>
<td>How can I help?</td>
<td>Kids learn collaboratively and have opportunities to be kind to others</td>
<td>Empathy, respect for diversity, negotiation</td>
<td>Active citizenship (Learning to live together)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engage</td>
<td>I can change things for the better.</td>
<td>Kids are encouraged to think and act to bring positive change around them</td>
<td>Creativity, resilience, self-management</td>
<td>Employability &amp; entrepreneurship (Learning to do)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. Impacting learning processes requires long-term efforts to mainstream a learning culture in the system, which necessitates shifts in both systems and mindsets around learning.

Phase 2 found that there are no single interventions that will certainly fix the learning crisis; but that improving learning requires both short-term efforts to shift learning outcomes, and long-term efforts to shift learning processes. What can ultimately improve learning processes is to target not only systemic factors that impact classroom behaviours as discussed above, but also to target mindsets that impede teachers and others in the system from engaging in holistic learning processes. One option is to explore whether any changes can be made in the motivations and incentive structures driving behaviours in the system, for example by shifting assessments to measure more holistic learning, or exploring non-financial incentives such as public approval to encourage desired behaviours. Ultimately mainstreaming a learning culture in the system requires offering people opportunities to ‘think and do’, where individuals at each level are empowered to think how they can creatively use their strengths to contribute to the goal of learning for every child. Long-term sustained focus on such small leverage points in the system can lead to compounded impact over time, to begin shifting education systems in South Asia. The report listed possible strategic leverage points for implementing a learning culture in both short-term efforts to impact learning outcomes and long-term efforts to impact learning processes, including strategies that could be used in classrooms, systems, and UNICEF offices. Ultimately each team will need to reflect together to identify what leverage points would work best for improving learning in their context.

GOING FORWARD…

Recommendations for UNICEF

Given UNICEF’s global, national, and local connections, and based on an analysis of the strengths and limitations of both UNICEF and systems, the following are some proposed areas whereby UNICEF could uniquely contribute to learning for every child:

1. **Use its strategic position to align all education actors at national and sub-national levels around learning**, for example in sector or sub-sector planning, to clarify each one’s role in how they can best contribute to improved learning. This includes aligning key system components that impact learning such as departments in charge of training, curriculum, assessment, school management, and school supervision, to ensure they work collaboratively in support of adequate teaching and learning processes.

2. **Help systems to analyse and strengthen factors that directly impact what happens in classrooms (both learning processes and outcomes)** through classroom-based studies, and reflections at different levels (including within UNICEF teams) to analyse and address factors impacting learning (see Fig 1 for examples).

3. **Operationalise a learning lens in UNICEF’s quality programming** such as CFS, designing plans that are strategic yet achievable to impact both core as well as enabling factors needed for learning.

4. **Help governments operationalize a learning lens**, by using its global and local networks to both highlight what works for impacting teaching and learning, and to simplify complex ideas related to learning by designing brochures, videos or tools to make these understandable and usable by key players in the system.
5. **Promote long-term measures to shift both systems and mindsets around learning, in order to mainstream a learning culture in South Asia** by providing opportunities for people to ‘think and do’ to improve learning for every child.

### Recommendations for systems

According to the Phase 2 report, an achievable approach to quality learning in South Asia could involve defining foundational learning goals that include both academic and transferable skills (e.g. 3Rs+ 4Es), empowering key players to think together what they can do at their level to help ensure all children meet these goals, and assessing and supporting those who are not yet achieving them. Based on this, below are some suggestions of strategic leverage points whereby government systems could have a greater impact on learning and thus where UNICEF could support systems (along with examples of outliers in South Asia who illustrate these principles and have demonstrated positive impact on learning):

1. **Clarify minimum holistic learning goals** (for both academic and transferable skills, especially at foundational levels), and design assessments to adequately measure these competencies (as attempted in the Rohingya crisis response in Bangladesh)

2. **Prioritise teachers and teaching in efforts to improve learning**, through a variety of measures to empower teachers as professionals based on a long-term teacher development plan that links pre-service training, in-service school-based coaching, and peer collaboration so teachers can together innovate creative solutions to learning-related challenges (like the teacher-led CFS network in Chennai, India, or Mobile Teacher Meetings in Nepal)

3. **Target factors that impede teachers’ effectiveness in promoting learning**, including motivation levels and other aspects of teachers’ context-specific realities (like STIR Education’s efforts in India to strengthen the motivation of government teachers through non-financial incentives)

4. **Implement structured pedagogical interventions** that use user-friendly materials or teacher notes to change students’ learning experiences, and that encourage teaching to appropriate levels (like ‘Early Grades Reading’ in Nepal)

5. **Help educational actors at all levels to analyse and use evidence for improving learning**, through building user-friendly tools and building systems’ capacities for evidence-informed action at various levels (like ‘Data Must Speak’ in Nepal)

6. **Strengthen accountability for learning**, by empowering parents to demand and support learning, or working with teacher unions to strengthen accountability (like posters with grade-wise learning objectives displayed in schools in India)

### Strategic planning for creating learning systems

This report recommends a more focused, realistic and innovative approach to UNICEF’s planning for learning improvement – to create plans that are indeed achievable and strategic in the South Asian context. Mainstreaming a learning culture where teams at each level have the space to collaboratively innovate to come up with new solutions to the learning crisis, requires first promoting this within UNICEF. For example, maximising the impact of each UNICEF team on learning would involve each team hiring a Learning Specialist whose main responsibility is to find ways to support systems to impact learning, and to create spaces to think together on tasks that may not be visibly urgent but are still priorities, such as the most effective ways to impact learning in that context. Below are some suggested reflection questions that could guide a strategic planning process for creating learning systems:
1. **Key targets**: What systemic factors affecting learning processes and outcomes need strengthening to improve learning processes and outcomes in our context?

2. **Strategic focus**: Which components of the system that affect learning are we best placed to impact (vs. which should be targeted by government or partners), and how can we do this?

3. **Constraints**: What practical constraints or uncertainties may prevent us from achieving these goals?

4. **Achievable**: What are some leverage points that could make it more likely to achieve our goals even given our constraints?

5. **Long-term perspective**: What long-term steps can we take now to contribute to shifting systems and mindsets to mainstream a learning culture in the system?
## ACRONYMS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABAL</td>
<td>Ability Based Accelerated Learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>ABL</td>
<td>Activity-Based Learning (India)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CFA</td>
<td>Child-friendly Approach (Sri Lanka)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CFS</td>
<td>Child-friendly Schools</td>
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<tr>
<td>CO</td>
<td>Country Office</td>
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<td>DP</td>
<td>Development Partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECL</td>
<td>Each Child Learns (Bangladesh)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EEDD</td>
<td>Equity in Education in Disadvantaged Districts (Nepal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EFL</td>
<td>Early Grades Learning (Nepal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EGRA</td>
<td>Early Grade Reading Assessments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESP</td>
<td>Education Sector Plan</td>
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<tr>
<td>GES</td>
<td>Global Education Strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GPE</td>
<td>Global Partnership for Education</td>
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<td>HRBAP</td>
<td>Human Rights-based Approach to Programming</td>
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<td>IB</td>
<td>International Baccalaureate</td>
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<td>LMTF</td>
<td>Learning Metrix Task Force</td>
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<td>LBL</td>
<td>Level-Based Learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>LSCE</td>
<td>Life Skills and Citizenship Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>MTM</td>
<td>Mobile Teacher Meetings (Nepal)</td>
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<td>NEAS</td>
<td>National Education Assessment System (Pakistan)</td>
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<td>PTR</td>
<td>Pupil-teacher ratio</td>
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<td>ROSA</td>
<td>Regional Office for South Asia</td>
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<td>SA</td>
<td>South Asia</td>
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<td>SCE</td>
<td>Second Chance Education</td>
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<td>TaRL</td>
<td>Teaching at the Right Level</td>
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<tr>
<td>TLM</td>
<td>Teaching Learning Materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UP</td>
<td>Uttar Pradesh (India)</td>
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INTRODUCTION: PLACING LEARNING AT THE CENTRE
CONTEXT, PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY

Despite the substantial progress made towards improving education quality in South Asia in the past decade, we still have not seen significant improvements in learning, and people are wondering what needs to be done differently. Thanks to increased investments and efforts in education, South Asian countries have seen a rapid increase in children aged 6-14 enrolled in school in recent decades. Numbers of children out of school at primary level have decreased from 15.9 million in 2006 (girls 9.1, boys 6.8), to 10.3 million in 2016 (girls 5.6, boys 4.7), and at lower secondary level from 29.8 million in 2006 (girls 16.6, boys 13.2) to 18.2 million in 2016 (girls 8, boys 10.2) (Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2018). Although efforts to increase access and reduce out-of-school children are often paying off, two complex challenges remain with little substantial change in status and with no easy answers: equity and learning. In one sense,
increasing access without learning becomes a child rights issue: enrolling more children in school may be doing them an injustice if even after coming to school, every child is still not able to fulfil their basic right to learn.

Globally, the biggest educational challenge faced by developing countries is that even when in school, many children are simply not learning. For the first time in history, there are more non-learners in school than out of school: 387 million children in primary school and 230 million adolescents in lower secondary school are failing to acquire even basic reading and math skills (UNICEF, 2019). This crisis is now brought to the forefront especially in light of Sustainable Development Goal 4 and UNICEF’s global education focus in 2019-2030 to ensure every child learns (UNICEF, 2019). South Asia in particular faces acute challenges of both equity and learning: progress in both enrolment and learning outcomes still shows wide disparities within countries (along lines of gender, income, caste, and location) as well as between countries (with the greatest challenges still faced by Afghanistan and Pakistan) (Dundar et al, 2014). Besides costing billions in wasted education funding, the learning crisis undermines countries’ competitiveness, economic growth, and efforts to alleviate poverty. Research shows that economic growth and returns on educational investments are determined not by number of years spent in school, but by learning levels (Hanushek, 2013). Thus improving learning outcomes becomes a top priority for developing countries – both from an equitable development lens, as well as from an economic growth lens.

While the learning crisis is being faced around the globe, certain dimensions make the learning crisis in South Asia unique to the region. The reasons children are not learning in South Asia are often different from the reasons children are not learning in other developing countries such as in parts of Africa. Many parts of South Asia now have relatively better infrastructure, pupil-teacher ratios (PTR) or teacher salaries, yet the persisting issues are deeper and more difficult to address: for example issues of mindsets, skills, and the motivation of teachers and others in the system (which although are also faced in other developing countries, in the case of South Asia may have roots that are unique to the region). Even where positive reforms for improving policies, examinations, schools or other inputs have been attempted, these have often come up against these three persisting challenges of mindset, mastery, and motivation. The nature of classroom processes or school supervision remain essentially unchanged, and thus the inputs have largely not translated into changes in learning processes and outcomes. Countries are realizing that merely increasing inputs without changing the nature of relationships (both inside and outside the classroom) is not translating into the desired outcome.

With the above context in mind, UNICEF’s Regional Office for South Asia (ROSA) commissioned in 2017 a mapping of all UNICEF-supported interventions in the previous decade to review and inform UNICEF’s ongoing efforts to improve education quality in the region (Brinkmann, 2018). The mapping involved online surveys and interviews with key UNICEF South Asia staff and partners, as well as review of UNICEF reports and other research. It found that UNICEF’s efforts to improve education in South Asia have made significant contributions to getting children to enrol and stay in school (e.g. by making schools more child-friendly), but have focused less on ensuring that children indeed learn once in school. UNICEF’s contributions to ensuring all children are in child-friendly environments have been necessary conditions for learning, but these have not been sufficient to ensure that teaching or learning actually change. There is need for a more operational approach regarding what placing learning at the centre would mean for UNICEF and for education systems – which was the driving motivation for Phase 2 of the mapping. Overall, the mapping threw light on two critical dimensions largely missing from efforts to improve education quality in South Asia: placing learning at the centre, and a systems perspective. The issue is not merely
one of resources or inputs; the complex learning crisis in South Asia requires both a shift in goal (from schooling to learning), and strategy (from increasing inputs to a systems thinking approach).

The present report emerged from a follow-up exercise commissioned by ROSA (‘Phase 2’) to think through how to better support UNICEF South Asia offices to implement these two findings: what it would look like to place learning at the centre of UNICEF’s educational programming, and how to use systems thinking to plan strategically for improving learning. Phase 2 of ROSA’s Quality Mapping, summarised in this report, attempted to:

1. Deepen analysis of existing research on learning in South Asia and other developing countries, to identify how UNICEF programming could better contribute to improving learning
2. Facilitate Country Office self-reflections on the effectiveness of their efforts to improve education quality
3. Identify a small number of effective working models or ‘outliers’ of good practice

The above involved analysis of research on improving learning in developing countries with a focus on South Asia; country visits to facilitate reflection workshops among UNICEF Country Offices (COs) in Dhaka, Delhi, Islamabad and Kathmandu; and skype or email discussions with key informants from UNICEF and its partners. This report synthesises insights emerging from the above activities, beginning with presenting the overall context and approach of the report in Section I. Findings on key principles that research shows can positively impact learning are presented in Section II, and outliers of good practice within government, non-profit and private sectors are presented in boxes throughout Sections I and II. Finally, section III draws recommendations emerging from the above analysis for UNICEF’s own work and its support to government systems, in the attempt to strengthen UNICEF’s contribution to improving learning in South Asia.
Reflections from Country Offices

A key message emerging from Phase 2 of ROSA’s Quality Mapping (from research, interviews and country reflections) is that learning must be at the centre of UNICEF’s quality programming, yet that there is a lack of strategic clarity towards the same. COs agreed that the success of UNICEF’s quality programming must ultimately be measured by progress in learning, with all programming seen through a ‘learning lens’ (i.e. in terms of its impact on learning). Yet COs also pointed out that there is a lack of common understanding of what learning means in practice. Among most government officials, teachers and parents, learning is typically understood as completing syllabi and textbooks in order to ensure students can give textbook answers to achieve grades in high-stakes standardised examinations.

SHIFTING TO A ‘LEARNING LENS’
What people believe is the goal of education ultimately determines what is taught and how it is assessed; thus shifting mindsets around the purpose of education is a necessary yet overlooked component of shifts in teaching and assessment. Moreover, in terms of strategy, CO Workshops revealed there is no coherent ‘Theory of Change’ (TOC) for learning – a clear logical framework model that outlines what strategic inputs and processes can lead to the desired outcome and how, and thus which interventions should be prioritised above which others at this point in order to lead to learning for every child. Thus overall, findings agreed with those of Sri Lanka’s ‘Child-Friendly Approach’ (CFA) evaluation: that there was not “a clear vision for change, nor…a clearly articulated strategy to bring about changes in school cultures” (UNICEF Sri Lanka, 2016, p.150).

CO reflections revealed that UNICEF’s efforts thus far have contributed to removing barriers to learning but that this did not necessarily translate into improvements in learning. At the same time, CO workshops revealed that there exist at present several drivers of change to support efforts at changing learning processes and outcomes in South Asia. Drivers of change include the growing dissatisfaction at the learning crisis in South Asia, despite recent improvements in enrolment and retention; and the fact that structures of policy, planning and monitoring though still weak are now more generally in place and readier to be geared up toward a greater focus on learning. This context makes this the right timing for a shift in goal and strategy of quality improvements in South Asia, in order to produce a different outcome.

Implications of applying a ‘learning lens’

Applying a ‘learning lens’ to quality programming involves clarifying in operational terms how particular interventions, programmes or policies will work together in a coherent manner to lead to improved learning. For example, it means broadening the concept of ‘inclusion’ to reflect not only whether all children have access to school, but whether they are all actively participating in learning processes and achieving learning outcomes. Or another example would be, not simply stating that gender-sensitive Teaching Learning Materials (TLM) will be supplied, but clarifying how these are expected to support girls’ learning, applying what standards of quality, using what benchmark indicators to measure change, and starting from which baseline data. Thus adopting a learning lens means not simply assuming learning will happen when the learning environment is improved, but supporting learning in more explicit, direct ways.

Applying a learning lens requires beginning with analysing what is happening in the classroom, and then analysing what components of the system impact learning processes and outcomes and can be shifted to bring changes in both. For example, training teachers in new pedagogies will have limited impact if the training is not aligned with curriculum, textbook and assessment systems, so that children have the required learning materials and are assessed in a manner that support the new pedagogies. For UNICEF teams, this would mean analysing the components of the overall system that affect learning, and using sector or sub-sector plans to focus on weaknesses within that context. A key part of enabling direct support to learning is empowering teachers – developing them as professionals with the needed skills and motivation to be able to provide that direct support to learning, and ultimately enabling governments to do so themselves (thus a focus on ‘learning’ subsumes a focus on ‘teaching’).

Defining learning

A major challenge of shifting the focus to learning (and teaching) in a South Asian context is the lack of common understanding of what we mean by learning, as pointed out in CO workshops. Prioritising learning outcomes without also emphasizing learning processes could end up fuelling an already strong ‘exam
culture’, placing greater pressure on both students and teachers to achieve higher grades on standardised examinations which may not actually be accurate measures of holistic learning. This challenge highlights the key need for educational partners like UNICEF to help countries define clearly what is the nature of learning that we really want students to achieve through their education – both content and processes; both knowledge and skills. UNICEF’s new Global Education Strategy (GES) for 2019-30 offers a useful starting point, defining learning as developing both foundational skills and transferable skills (UNICEF, 2019).

While foundational academic learning at the primary level (needed for further learning, regardless of future aspirations) would include what has been commonly called the ‘3 Rs’ (reading, writing, and arithmetic), foundational transferable skills (needed to live contributing lives) are more difficult to define and implement, especially for early learners. For older students, transferable skills are well defined by UNICEF’s ‘Life Skills and Citizenship Education’ (LSCE) framework, which lists 12 core life skills we want students to achieve through their education, in addition to academic skills (UNICEF MENA, 2017). At the primary level, where such transferable skills have not been clearly defined in implementable terms, these could perhaps be summarised as the ‘4Es’: education that teaches students to enjoy learning, explore for themselves, empathise with others, and engage to bring positive change around them. The term ‘4Es’ is introduced in this report to capture the essential skills identified in UNICEF’s LSCE framework, but in terms that also capture desired learning processes, that are applicable even for young learners, and that are easily understandable and memorable by implementers, as shown in Table 1. The process described in Table 1 builds on the discussion on the need to promote learning through play for young learners by emphasizing enjoyment and exploration (e.g. see UNICEF, 2018), but go beyond this discussion in also emphasizing skills like empathy and engagement, which this report argues are also foundational ‘learning to learn’ competencies.

Table 1: The ‘4Es’ of holistic learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>4Es</th>
<th>Learning goals (what we want children to think)</th>
<th>Learning processes</th>
<th>LSCE skills</th>
<th>LSCE goals (and UNESCO 4 pillars)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enjoy</td>
<td>I love learning!</td>
<td>Kids have fun together and enjoy the process of learning</td>
<td>Participation, communication, cooperation</td>
<td>Learning (Learning to know)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explore</td>
<td>Why are things this way?</td>
<td>Kids have freedom to ask questions and explore their curiosity to discover answers for themselves</td>
<td>Critical thinking, decision-making, problem-solving</td>
<td>Personal empowerment (Learning to be)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathise</td>
<td>How can I help?</td>
<td>Kids learn collaboratively and have opportunities to be kind to others</td>
<td>Empathy, respect for diversity, negotiation</td>
<td>Active citizenship (Learning to live together)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engage</td>
<td>I can change things for the better.</td>
<td>Kids are encouraged to think and act to bring positive change around them</td>
<td>Creativity, resilience, self-management</td>
<td>Employability &amp; entrepreneurship (Learning to do)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This is of course a simplistic understanding of ‘transferable skills’, which arguably contains many more nuanced dimensions as well laid out in the LSCE framework. However, LSCE’s support for the development of all 12 core skills would be difficult to implement in millions of South Asian primary schools where poorly-trained teachers with large class sizes and insufficient support are struggling to achieve even the 3Rs. The attempt to be adequately accurate and nuanced at times comes at the cost of usability in low-skilled environments. Frameworks like the 4Es can be simple without necessarily being simplistic, and are achievable even in low-skilled settings given positive classroom and school cultures. Given the existing context and capacity levels in the region, perhaps the 4Es could be an intermediate focus applicable to South Asian primary schools and understandable by teachers and school inspectors, to shift the focus from only learning outcomes, to also learning processes.

Primary education for any child can be considered truly successful if children are able to learn foundational academic skills while having fun, getting to explore, learning to relate kindly to others, and engaging to bring positive change around them (i.e. the 3Rs + 4Es). Even many of the top private primary schools in South Asia are able to achieve the 3Rs, but still struggle to implement the 4Es. Innovative pedagogical programmes in the government system such as India’s Activity Based Learning (ABL) or Sri Lanka’s Child-friendly Approach (CFA) have indeed promoted greater enjoyment and hands-on exploration by children, but they have arguably provided limited scope for children to explore their own curiosity, work collaboratively, or engage in creative thinking to contribute to the world around them (Shukla, 2011). Riverside School, Ahmedabad (India) is one example of an out-of-the-box South Asian private school that is attempting to teach children transferable life skills through the very processes it uses to teach core academic skills (see Box 1).

At secondary level the skills required become more complex. The Learning Metrics Task Force (LMTF) offers a useful synthesis of 7 key domains in which children need to develop incrementally throughout their schooling: namely, physical well-being, social & emotional, culture & the arts, literacy & communication, learning approaches & cognition, numeracy & mathematics, science & technology (UNESCO & Brookings, 2013). But even if children graduating from South Asian government schools were to achieve at least the foundational 3Rs and 4Es, they would be better placed than they are now to grow and develop the further skills they need to live healthy, caring and contributing lives, which is ultimately the goal we want for.
At the Riverside School, Ahmedabad, children learn academic skills through a process in which they enjoy, explore, empathise and engage, in order to think and act to contribute to the world around them. The school was founded by Kiran Bir Sethi in 2001, when she was dissatisfied with her own 5-year-old son’s schooling which was already teaching him an ‘I Can’t’ mindset. Drawing from her design background, Sethi listened to children to design a school that would help them flourish. She wanted her school to instil in children an ‘I Can’ mindset – an entrepreneurship mindset where children believe that they can do things to make a difference in the world.

Wanting to have an impact beyond her school, in 2009 Sethi launched a national and then international movement called ‘Design for Change’. She applied key principles of design thinking to education, boiling it down into a simple four-step process: ‘Feel-Imagine-Do-Share’. Similar to the ‘4Es’, this process aims at teaching children to empathise with others facing a problem, to creatively explore solutions, to engage in enacting these solutions, and then to communicate the story to inspire others.

Research has shown the importance of ensuring foundational skills as a predictor of future success in learning (see Board on Children, Youth, and Families, 2015). If children are taught to be lifelong learners when they are young, they also become more autonomous in their learning; thus getting the foundations in place is critical in early years. In South Asia unfortunately, many children leave primary school without acquiring even the 3Rs, often determined by socio-economic background. Thus ensuring universal learning in early grades becomes essential for meeting both efficiency and equity targets (Dundar et al, 2014). Both the 3Rs and 4Es are essential not only for future learning but also for leading contributing lives – thus both form part of holistic foundational learning. UNICEF can play a key role in promoting alignment of all inputs and actors in the system towards ensuring all children achieve holistic learning – broadly defined here to include both learning outcomes and processes, both academic and transferable skills, both the 3Rs and 4Es, and applicable to both students and teachers. These would be in line with UNICEF’s global mandate of ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all children, as envisioned in Sustainable Development Goal 4.
THINKING SYSTEMICALLY ABOUT LEARNING: FROM IMPROVING SCHOOLS TO SHIFTING SYSTEMS

In order to achieve a different outcome, the Quality Mapping Phase 1 and 2 call for shifting not only the goal of UNICEF’s quality programming, but also the strategy: from improving individual inputs (e.g. schools, materials, training programmes), to shifting entire systems. To facilitate such a shift, this report adopts a systemic approach, drawing from key principles of the discipline of systems thinking (explained below). A systemic approach to education reform begins with a clear analysis of what is happening in the classroom (teaching and learning), followed by an analysis of the key parts of the education system that impact this (e.g. teacher education, assessment, curriculum, textbooks, monitoring, etc.), with efforts aimed at ensuring that the entire system is aligned to support the desired vision of teaching and learning.
Systems thinking is a multidisciplinary way of thinking that focuses on seeing a system as a whole, with multiple interconnected parts that bear an influence on other parts. As a discipline it gained prominence in recent decades through the work of theorists like Peter Senge, Donella Meadows and Talcott Parsons, and today has been identified as one of the key management competencies for the 21st century (Kim, 1999). Systems thinking is a method of thinking useful for analysing and changing complex systems, by helping people think through all the different components that impact the desired outcome, and to consider what could be the intended and unintended consequences of their decisions. It keeps in mind that the parts of a system are interrelated – thus our proposed solutions often bear unintended consequences on a different part of the system, and that there are no guaranteed fixes since we cannot definitively predict human behaviour. By helping us think through system interrelations and unintended consequences, systems thinking tools help us to make more informed decisions that have greater likelihood of success, and to increase organizational impact without increasing the size of the organisation. A systemic approach to education recognizes that education systems are complex and multifaceted, with each part of the system impacting another. Thus bringing change in this complex ecosystem needs to be systemic, since it is impossible to change one component of the system without simultaneously addressing other components that impact on it.

The discipline of systems thinking offers various useful tools and models for looking in fresh ways at familiar, complex problems where known solutions have not worked – such as the question of how to ensure quality education for millions of poor children. One such useful systems thinking tool that can help facilitate deeper understanding of a system is the Iceberg Model, shown in Figure 1.

**PICTURE**

**The Iceberg Model applied to South Asian education**
(adapted from Goodman, 2012)
To illustrate the Iceberg Model (example adapted from McElyea, 2012), suppose Education Planner X in District YZ wants to address the learning crisis in his district. If he targets the level of ‘events’ (the low learning levels in his district), he could plan initiatives to increase student enrolment, school attendance, or teachers’ participation in training programmes. If planner X wants to go deeper, he might observe patterns like certain regions of District YZ tend to have poorer learning levels, and he might allocate resources differently so that poorer performing regions receive more resources (which increases performance in those low-performing regions, but ends up decreasing performance in other parts of the district). To really address the learning crisis in his district, X begins targeting the deeper structures contributing to the pattern of low learning results – such as the fact that various government schemes to improve learning in YZ, systems such as examination systems or school monitoring systems are not aligned to support the pedagogical changes that would enable improved learning. All these structural elements are reinforcing the learning crisis but are often not adequately addressed, and learning remains low (addressing structural changes is discussed in Section II.2). However, to change a complex system like education in District YZ, Planner X would also need to attempt shifts in the mindsets driving the behaviour of teachers, families, and other educational stakeholders in District YZ (addressing mindsets is discussed in Section II.3). The deeper Planner X goes into addressing not only patterns but also the underlying systems and mindsets contributing to the learning crisis, the more he is able to gain leverage for bringing lasting improvements in the learning levels of District YZ despite his limited resources.

Drawing from key principles of system thinking, below are some proposed shifts in UNICEF’s quality programming that could help maximise its impact on learning

**FOCUS – From trying to do many things to focusing on a few strategic targets:** As per the commonly-used 80/20 management principle, about 80% of an organisation’s efforts yield only 20% of results, and vice versa – the majority of impact comes from just a few strategic activities. One of UNICEF’s key constraints identified in the Quality Mapping is a tendency to try to show impact in many areas – which though they are important, ends up diluting its impact in any one area. The challenge for UNICEF is to conduct a self-reflection to identify what are its 80/20 strategic leverage points that can yield the greatest impact with minimum effort on shifting systems to align them with improved learning processes and outcomes – whether large-scale actions like interventions to shift national assessments to testing competencies instead of content, or small-scale actions like extra time spent to deepen individual relationships and build trust with senior officials, which could bear exponential impact on advocacy efforts.

**REALISTIC – From idealised to pragmatic planning, that factors in constraints, uncertainties, human nature, and possible unforeseen consequences:** Over the years, governments and Development Partners (DPs) alike have tried to implement well-crafted plans to bring changes in teaching, assessments, or other aspects central to improving learning. However, often these well-laid plans have been thwarted by unplanned contingencies, such as changes in government leadership, natural disasters, conflict situations, political pressures, or ‘unforeseen consequences’ (such as beautifully produced learning materials that lie unused in a classroom cupboard for fear of them getting spoiled). A thoughtful systems analysis could reveal the ‘known unknowns’ that typically tend to go wrong in quality improvement efforts (whether unforeseen calamities, lack of systemic alignment, or simply lack of motivation or time). Thinking systematically about teaching-learning involves understanding the environment both inside and outside the classroom, and taking into account the realities of both teachers’ and students’ lives and the motivations that drive their behaviour. Planning with these realities in mind can help create more agile plans that are able to adjust in light of these realities, and still continue to strengthen the key essentials needed for learning, even if in different ways in case of changes or constraints.
The urgency of South Asia’s learning crisis is causing many to innovate to try to find low-cost solutions that use available technologies to bridge learning gaps even given existing constraints. One such organisation is Sampark Foundation, started in Punjab in 2004 to promote achievement of basic math and language skills among 80% of India’s children with 1 year of instruction, under $1 per child per year. To achieve this goal, Sampark is experimenting with simple, low-cost teaching aids geared to make learning more fun in ways that can be replicated for millions of children, such as ‘Sampark Didi’, an LCD visual and audio device that comes pre-loaded with lessons based on children’s stories. Sampark was founded on a theory of change that believes that ‘frugal innovation’ and its effective implementation alongside government partners can drive large-scale improvement in learning outcomes. Sure enough, the organisation has already reached 7 million children in 76,000 schools across 6 Indian states, and preliminary research shows significant increases in learning levels. A third-party assessment found that the percentage of children able to answer grade-level questions in Math and English increased from 29% to 68% in Chhattisgarh, from 18% to 54% in Jharkhand, and from 23% to 70% in Haryana (Feedback Consulting, 2019). Sampark is part of a growing network of organisations committed to problem-solving instead of problem-discussing, by applying latest business principles and user-centred design thinking to brainstorm creative frugal solutions to promoting learning at scale (Robinson, 2014).

While some organisations like Sampark have the funding to provide learning solutions to governments at low cost, other EdTech (technologies used to facilitate learning) initiatives like “Mindspark” have also shown positive impacts on learning, even if they come at a cost. For example, Mindspark uses a lottery system that provides winners free access to a personalised technology-aided after-school instruction programme. Mindspark uses latest technology to personalise questions to match the level and rate of progress made by each individual student, and can be delivered in a variety of settings such as schools, after-school centres, or through self-guided study. In this manner it has been able to reach both urban slums and remote conflict-affected villages (The EDge, 2019). Muralidharan, Singh and Ganimian’s (2018) evaluation found that Mindspark students scored 0.37 standard deviation higher in math and 0.23 standard deviation higher in language over just a 4.5-month period. These learning gains were found for all students but especially for academically-weaker students, and suggests that well-designed technology-aided instruction programmes could be effective in improving universal learning at scale. Today’s increasing access to internet means that the many available learning websites like Khanacademy.com or mathgames.com could present one learning solution that could reach millions of teachers and students. All that is needed is someone with the motivation, resources and networks to identify and make these available to teachers – which UNICEF may be well-placed to do.

The above are only two examples of innovative solutions that use available technologies to meet the target of universal learning even in the face of existing constraints. UNICEF ROSA’s (2019) ‘EdTech’ report discusses various trends and examples of technology solutions already being implemented in South Asia and globally to advance the learning agenda. It is this kind of culture of creative experimentation at every level that is ultimately needed for finding solutions to South Asia’s learning crisis. Although this kind of innovative thinking is not often seen in the government sector, it is possible and has been seen when government players are given the opportunity to think together to find new solutions to complex problems – such as a recent workshop held by Pakistan CO to empower selected teachers to brainstorm creative solutions to the challenge of promoting greater parental involvement in schools (interview with UNICEF staff). UNICEF could use its resources and networks to help incentivise this kind of culture of innovation. An example of an initiative to incentivise innovation is the ‘XPrize for Global Learning’, a global initiative that offered a $10 million prize to the best solutions that students could come up with to the complex challenge of promoting learning at scale among some of the world’s poorest children (BBC news, 2019). Nearly 200 teams from 40 countries submitted entries of software that could enable children in Tanzania to teach themselves basic reading, writing and math within 15 months. Five finalists were each given a million dollars to field test their solutions, and the two winners, from Kenya and South Korea, were awarded the prize by entrepreneur Elon Musk. The initiative ultimately sought to empower children to take control of their learning.
INNOVATIVE THINKING – From fixed to responsive planning, using systems and technologies to minimise barriers and increase impact: A crazy person is someone who keeps performing the same action and expects a different result each time. Systemic change entails a shift from doing more of the same, to changing the strategy itself. Complex challenges such as ensuring learning at scale will be difficult to address without the kind of innovative thinking sometimes seen in the private sector – which is possible even in the government sector when people are given opportunities to come together and apply their minds to thinking of new solutions to difficult challenges. Latest developments in technology or business thinking could be used to greatly increase the impact of UNICEF’s efforts even without increasing its size. For example, a key barrier identified in the Quality Mapping is that staff typically do not get much time for the deeper creative thinking needed for addressing complex issues like South Asia’s learning crisis. Some possible creative solutions for this barrier in the short term could be to have ‘closed-door periods’ to have space to focus on complex issues like learning, ‘brown-bag lunches’ where team members can think together for solving complex issues, or hiring a Learning Specialist whose main responsibility is to find ways to impact learning. In the long term, UNICEF could help incentivise a culture of innovation to explore creative solutions like how latest technologies and innovations such as in the fields of Artificial Intelligence or Machine Learning could be used not only to support its own staff (e.g. by automating some of specialists’ administrative tasks which could be done even with just more streamlined software solutions), but also to support learning in ways targeted to both students’ and teachers’ levels (as discussed by Baron, Taveras & Zuniga, 2018, Murphy, 2019, and UNICEF ROSA, 2019. See Box 2 for some examples of innovative technological solutions to the learning crisis). Brookings’ ‘Millions Learning’ project is one example of an initiative attempting to promote a culture of innovation by identifying outliers who have experimented with out-of-the-box solutions that have proven effective in providing quality education at scale (Robinson & Winthrop, 2016). The report presents various suggestions for creating a culture of innovation in education, where education systems provide space for innovation and experimentation to thrive among various stakeholders, and facilitate the spread of new ideas that are most effective in improving learning.

LEARNING FROM THE BEST – From pockets of high-impact innovations, to principles of successful scale-up and mainstreaming for different contexts: Evidence shows that there are no guaranteed fixes: there are successful principles, but successful practices are context-specific. For example, research shows that empowering parents by providing them with learning information or involving them meaningfully in school management worked well in urban settings where more educated, well-off parents could support in more direct ways. But findings were more ambiguous in rural areas, where these advantages may not be realised if local communities lack the skills or knowledge to effectively manage schools’ without micromanaging teachers (Krishnaratne, White & Carpenter, 2013, p. 39). This does not mean that involving parents meaningfully in school management does not have a positive impact on accountability and effective use of resources, but rather that energy must not be poured only into whether to do a certain activity, but also into how the activity is done. Any ‘best principles’ derived from successful outliers must be experimented to determine what will be the ‘best practice’ most appropriate to that particular context. In learning from successful models, core non-negotiable elements must be distinguished from those that are more flexible and can be adapted to different contexts (Robison & Winthrop, 2016). Thanks to its global networks, UNICEF is well positioned to glean from the best in the world: the best successful models, expertise or consultants to apply their minds to helping solve the complex challenges of learning in South Asia.
**INCENTIVES** – From structures that incentivise exam results to structures that incentivise learning: At present, education systems tend to incentivise teachers, students and parents to direct all their energies towards achieving high marks in standardised tests—which typically assess memorization of textbook information. Despite a few attempts to change this in some South Asian governments, the dominant incentive structures in the region make any attempts at changing learning processes or outcomes very difficult. A realistic analysis of what are the motivations that drive the actions of key players (teachers, students, parents) could help reveal what are some potential tweaks that could be made to incentive structures, so that key players are rewarded in some way (whether through grades, appreciation, material benefits, etc.) to perform the desired actions that can lead to improved learning processes and outcomes. For example, high-status opportunities or public appreciation for well-performing teachers could go a long way to incentivising certain behaviours in a cultural context where public image weighs highly (such as used by STIR Education in India—described in Box 8). Linking promotions or other benefits with performance could also be a way to incentivise desired behaviours from various actors in the education system. At the same time, ensuring that assessments themselves test not only content but also higher order 21st century skills like problem-solving, life skills or creativity is crucial in shifting the focus in schools so that they do better in these kinds of exams.

The more UNICEF offices can learn and apply systems thinking principles in their strategic planning for learning improvement, the more they can increase their impact in this relatively new focus for education in South Asia. Learning key principles from their own and others’ efforts regarding how to improve learning processes and outcomes at scale will help UNICEF to better use its strengths—such as advocacy—to advise governments on the most strategic investments they can make to improve learning—seeing this as the goal of providing quality education. A key strategic role for UNICEF in helping shift systems to place learning at the centre in South Asian education could be to promote alignment of different system components around the goal of learning, to encourage the most strategic investments for improving learning, and to itself model the learning culture we wish to see in South Asian education systems—which are discussed in the next section.
A TEAM RESPONSE TO SOUTH ASIA’S LEARNING CRISIS
This section draws lessons from global research, analysis of outliers within South Asia, and reflections from County Office workshops or discussions with UNICEF staff and partners, to identify what has been found effective for improving learning in South Asia. Overall, the Mapping Phase 2 found that unfortunately there are no ‘silver bullets’: no specific interventions that with certainty will fix the learning crisis in South Asia. Rather, impacting learning will require a combination of both short-term and long-term measures: short-term interventions to impact learning outcomes, alongside more long-term efforts to impact learning processes in order to mainstream a learning culture in South Asia. While discrete high-impact interventions can show a short-term impact on learning outcomes, mainstreaming a learning culture that can show sustained impact on both learning outcomes and processes will require more long-term efforts to shift both systems around learning as well as mindsets around learning among different players in the system.

The first part of the section discusses what might be involved in conducting a systematic analysis of factors that impact learning and that would need to be addressed by efforts to improve learning. The section then presents a summary of 4 key principles that research shows as common among many successful efforts to improve learning in South Asia, followed by a discussion of how these principles could be applied to short-term interventions to impact learning. Next is a discussion on how these principles can be applied to long-term efforts to shift systems and mindsets. Finally, practical leverage points are suggested for mainstreaming a learning culture in classrooms, government systems, and UNICEF teams. Examples of positive outliers who have been able to show impact on learning in government schools are included in boxes throughout the section.
Causal analysis of factors affecting learning

Any effective prescription must begin with a right diagnosis. An effective strategy for impacting learning must begin with an accurate analysis of what is happening in the classroom, and what factors impact and perhaps impede desired changes in learning processes and outcomes. A useful tool that can be used to analyse these factors as part of conducting a situational analysis of a given context to inform planning is a causal analysis diagram, described by UNICEF Evaluation Office (2003). A causal analysis can yield a conceptual framework that can help explain why things are the way they are, and what key contributing factors need to be addressed to change the situation. A sample causal analysis of learning that can be adapted to different South Asian contexts is proposed in Figure 2, which
**Sample causal analysis of learning in South Asia based on the Iceberg Model**
(adapted from UNICEF ESARO, 2012)

### Thriving Learners
Physical and emotional health, nutrition and social welfare; positive early learning experiences

### Community participation
Community ownership of schools; appropriate use of resources; parental support to learning; availability of schools; household illness/family conflicts.

### Participation in Schooling
Access to schooling; regular attendance; completion

### Teachers & teaching geared towards learning
Learning-centred pedagogy

### Effectively-run schools
Teacher availability & attendance; Teacher skills & motivation; relevant curriculum & materials; assessment of learning outcomes; transition rates; quality and safety of school environment; dynamic school leadership.

### Supportive systems
Legislation; policies, plans; school fees; education of marginalized children including disabled children; teacher education & management; evidence-informed planning; monitoring & evaluation; quality assurance; examinations.
Cross-cutting issues: decentralization; horizontal and vertical communication; capacity development, affirmative action for marginalised children; emergency preparedness and response; national budgets & financing; global initiatives & foreign aid.

### Cultural & political context
Social equity; Democratic & inclusive relationships; Political will/leadership; Cultural and traditional norms (ethnic, religious); Mindsets around education; Security & social cohesion; Human rights.
draws upon the model proposed by UNICEF Evaluation Office (2003), and adapts the model utilised in the Equity Strategy note developed by UNICEF’s Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Office (ESARO) in 2012. It also seeks to draw insights from the Iceberg Model discussed in Section I.3, by incorporating the concepts of underlying systems and underlying mindsets, which although are not exactly the same as the underlying and basic causes proposed in UNICEF Evaluation Office’s model (2003), the former to a large extent informs the latter.

**Systems mapping: Core and enabling factors needed for learning**

ROSA’s Quality Mapping found a difference between core and enabling factors needed for learning, which contribute to learning more directly vs. indirectly. At its core, learning happens when people have a challenging or engaging yet achievable task in front of them, and the support of a mentor who is skilled and motivated to help them learn, respects them and can engage in authentic dialogue to help them explore solutions, and can help adjust the task as per the learner’s current level (see Berkeley Centre for Teaching & Learning, 2019; Schweisfurth, 2019). This process is applicable to children, as well as to teachers and others in the system. Thus these 4 elements are core learning factors needed for learning in the classroom. However in order to enable these 4 elements in the classroom, this requires an effective school and supportive education system – thus the school and systemic context are enabling conditions for learning, as shown in Figure 3.

A systemic approach to strengthening learning would begin with trying to understand what is happening in the classroom, seek to target core factors that impact this directly, as well as enabling factors that impact this more indirectly, in order to lead to improved learning processes and outcomes. The above diagram focuses specifically on those factors that can be influenced by the education system, leaving out unseen links to other sectors or issues that impact learning such as family context. In recent decades, UNICEF’s quality programming in South Asia has focused more on strengthening enabling school-related factors, such as ensuring that learners are thriving and ready to learn, that school environments are welcoming to all learners, or that curriculum and materials are relevant to students’ current and future needs. These are necessary but not sufficient conditions for learning. Considerable attention is needed to strengthen core factors needed for learning, as well as gearing up systems to be able to adequately contribute to this. Aligning resources (human and financial) to lead to improved learning would require government and administrative systems that prioritise and support children’s learning – which is a key area which UNICEF can advocate for and support. UNICEF can play a critical role in helping governments analyse and strengthen not only core factors but also enabling school and system conditions needed for learning – including governance, accountability and institutional analysis, as well as sufficiency of inputs and financing.

**Research findings: What MAY or MAY NOT work to improve learning**

Both research and CO workshops revealed that one of the factors typically seen as the key to improving education – additional resources – has NOT made a clear contribution to improving learning outcomes. Interventions involving increased resources such as reducing schooling costs, expanding schooling options, infrastructure improvements, schooling inputs, reducing class size, conditional cash transfers, or even raising teacher salaries, have not unambiguously led to improvement in learning levels according to research (Dundar et al, 2014; Krishnaratne, White & Carpenter, 2013; Murnane and Ganimian, 2014; World Bank, 2018a). Even providing resources like new textbooks or technological interventions either fail to reach classrooms, or fail to enhance teaching and learning even when they do (World Bank, 2018a, Bernard & Shakya, 2014). Investing resources into one component of the system will not have systemic impact if the remainder of the system is not functioning well. Thus
### Core and enabling factors needed for learning

**Core Factors**

1. All actors aligned around achievable learning-centred targets
2. Skilled & motivated teachers able to implement learning-centred pedagogies
3. Assessment-based practice: Actions at all levels based on analysis of large-scale and formative assessments
4. Democratic relationships that respect learners’, teachers’ & parents’ contributions, and are inclusive to diverse needs (eg. diverse mother tongues, special needs, or multigrade settings)

**Enabling School Factors**

1. Healthy, well-nourished, thriving learners with positive early learning experiences & their rights respected
2. School-based opportunities for teachers to grow and learn together
3. Barrier-free, child-seeking environments that encourage all learners’ participation
4. Parents/ community actively involved in supporting learning
5. School leadership facilitates continued improvement in teaching & learning.
6. Curriculum and materials relevant to students’ levels, diversity, and futures

**Enabling Systemic Factors**

1. Conducive policies & plans target key factors impacting learning
2. Teacher education & teacher management systems support teachers’ growth as professionals
3. Monitoring & evaluation systems support continued improvement in teaching-learning
4. Flexible, long-term financing used strategically to improve learning & incentivise desired behaviours
5. Curriculum & assessment systems promote holistic learning
while adequate investments in education is crucial, investments in themselves may not be sufficient for delivering quality. As highlighted by one meta-analysis of available studies, ‘more or better resources were not found to improve student learning unless they improved student-teacher interactions, to change children’s daily experiences at school’ (Murnane and Ganimian, 2014, p.2). Impacting children’s daily experiences and thus their learning outcomes may be less about investing resources, and more about the quality of programme implementation, which is typically influenced not only by systemic alignment, but also by cultural mindsets, which will be discussed later in this report (Section II.3).

Some of the research findings are ambiguous in terms of whether certain interventions have a positive impact on learning or not. For example, contract teachers is one measure employed to address the issue of lack of teachers, but this quick-fix measure showed mixed results given these teachers’ low skill level (Asim et al, 2015), and unintended consequences such as its undermining effect on the teaching profession. Similarly, the use of computer-aided learning was found useful only in the hands of empowered teachers, parents, and students; it proved ‘ineffective when instruction is not tailored to each student’s level of knowledge, when technology distribution is unaccompanied by parent or student training’ (Asim et al, 2015, p.13). In the same way, parental involvement (such as School Management Committees or Mothers’ Groups) generally showed a positive impact and are often used as proxies for education quality, but this too depended on parents’ skill and confidence levels to support their children’s learning, as discussed earlier. Thus much of the research shows that particular interventions are only helpful if they help to empower the key players so they can actually implement change effectively and benefit from it, and vice versa. Part of the ambiguity in research findings is due to limitations in evaluation design. Often studies simplistically evaluate only inputs and outputs, without adequately factoring compounding factors such as actors’ ability to use the inputs provided, the quality of the actions they take (e.g. when evaluating parent groups), a cost-benefit analysis of the intervention, or most importantly, whether they have made a difference to children’s learning experiences or outcomes.

Overall, what research shows can change student’s learning outcomes is to change their learning experiences: the nature of teacher-student interactions in the classroom (Evans and Popova, 2015; Barber, 2007; Fullan et al, 2018; Murnane and Ganimian, 2014). In terms of what can help to impact students’ learning experiences and outcomes, most of the principles underlying successful efforts emerging from analysis of research, interactions with COs, and examination of outliers, fit within 4 key principles that can be captured with the acronym T-E-A-M:

1. TARGET STRATEGIC PRIORITIES: Align all system components around achievable learning-related goals, based on an analysis of key factors affecting learning (Learning-centred)
2. EMPOWER KEY PLAYERS (especially teachers, and also parents & students) with the needed skills, motivation and autonomy so they can work from their strengths to creatively support learning (Teacher-driven)
3. ASSESS & ADJUST CONTINUALLY: Strengthen creation and use of evidence (Evidence-informed)
4. MOST TO THE LEAST: Promote a democratic culture that gives priority to the least in age, ability, or status (Equity-lens)

When applied to classrooms, what works to help children learn is an achievable curriculum focused on the development of foundational learning-to-learn competencies through both group work and individualised learning based on actual levels of readiness (T), on-going mentoring of teachers (and parents) on how they can best

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2 Since teachers have the most direct influence on students’ learning processes and outcomes, efforts to improve student learning must involve teachers at the core to be successful.
support learning-centred processes (E), flexible assessment-based practice that adjusts efforts to ensure all children learn (A), and, above all, a democratic culture that respects every learner (M).

When applied to systems, what works is to align all actors around a careful sector and sub-sector analysis of key system components impacting learning processes and outcomes (T), and planning how each player can be empowered to use their strengths (E) to contribute to improved learning (A) for all children (M). Adopting a systemic approach to learning involves alignment of policies, plans and institutional arrangement around a clear vision of desired classroom processes (which necessitates clear linkages between pre-service and in-service teacher education) (T), capacity-building of the entire system including flexible school-based teacher professional development (E), systematic monitoring and evaluation systems to continually assess progress (A), and the equitable distribution of resources (M) (Hardman et al, 2011).

The four T-E-A-M principles are key factors that research has shown can help contribute to both short-term improvements in learning outcomes and long-term shifts in learning processes. Moreover, they are applicable to all levels or organizations in the system (classrooms, government systems, and UNICEF teams): like Mahatma Gandhi’s famous challenge to ‘be the change you want to see’, promoting a TEAM learning culture in classrooms involves mainstreaming this kind of democratic learning approach in the ways of working of both government and UNICEF systems. Box 3 describes one example of how Bangladesh’s response to the Rohingya crisis used TEAM principles to successfully create structured learning systems for displaced children for the first time in Bangladesh. The rest of Section II.2 discusses possible strategies for implementing a TEAM approach in short-term high-impact interventions to improve learning outcomes, followed by suggestions for long-term efforts to shift learning processes in order to mainstream a learning culture in South Asia in Section II.3.
In addition to insights from COs and outliers, this report examined 15 different meta-analyses of research from the last decade on what works to improve learning in developing countries, several of which had a focus on South Asia (see Annex 1 for a summary table). Most findings broadly fit within the 4 principles of a TEAM approach, described below.
Based on this, a competency ladder was developed (Level I to V - equivalent to pre-primary to grade 10) but designed to be achieved in an accelerated manner at whatever age group was appropriate (between age 4 to 18).

- **Empower key players:** Greatest emphasis was placed on two things: empowering teachers through huge teacher capacity-building efforts, and supporting teachers by developing age-appropriate contextualised learning materials they could use (in partnership with British Council and BRAC). Teachers also felt more empowered since they were placed according to their level of capacity.

- **Assess and adjust continuously:** Customised assessments were developed to place both students and teachers at their appropriate level (despite errors faced related to the suitability of the instrument used to the context). Various challenges faced along the way (like space constraints, lack of skilled teachers, language barriers, accreditation issues) have necessitated creative new solutions to still ensure learning despite the constraints.

- **Most to the least:** Since most children were found to be at Levels I and II, the greatest focus was placed on helping all children achieve these foundational skills.

Despite facing criticism (especially in the press) for a slow education response, UNICEF has managed to create an acceptable temporary solution for more than 315,000 refugee children as a first step, with government buy-in. Whilst rolling-out the LCFA solution, UNICEF continued negotiations with the two governments (Bangladesh and Myanmar) until an agreement was reached in 2019 to use the Myanmar curriculum for the Rohingya children (which will be introduced on a pilot basis in the first half of 2020 for Grades 6 to 9, and then expanded to other grades in a phased manner). By securing government approvals at all times regarding an education response for the Rohingya refugees, UNICEF has ensured that the response is more sustainable in the long run, and also in the best interest of the children, who will be better equipped to reintegrate to the Myanmar education system and society when conditions become conducive for them to return to Myanmar in a voluntary, safe and dignified way.
TARGET STRATEGIC PRIORITIES: Align all educational actors around key achievable learning-related goals (Learning-centred)

For systems to be successful at improving learning processes and outcomes, they need to effectively align all educational actors around a common goal of improving learning (Dundar et al., 2014; The Education Commission, 2017; Hewlett Foundation, 2008; Robinson & Winthrop, 2016; UNESCO & Brookings, 2013; World Bank, 2018a). Alignment of components in the system around a common vision means that the assessment system or monitoring system for example actually encourage the desired processes and outcomes rather than contradicting it, as is often the case. Pursuing learning outcomes ‘works’ when it is clear that learning is expected, there is clarity on what that learning will look like, and when there is an agreed understanding of each one’s role in contributing to learning. This means developing precise and agreed indicators of the skills that teachers and students (as well as parents and employers) will expect to see, and making them compelling enough that students and teachers will care about achieving them. It requires framing learning goals in terms of who needs to do what to make learning happen; without this, as one UNICEF officer noted, “we are left with powerpoints, but no guides to actual practice”.

Targeting priorities requires discipline to make time for what we know is important even in light of competing priorities which seem more urgent – like taking time to prioritise learning before it becomes an even greater crisis, even in light of competing urgencies. Drawing from systems thinking, identifying what is most ‘strategic’ to target involves taking time to thoughtfully identify what are the strategic leverage points that can have the greatest impact in a given context, and focusing maximum energy to impacting those leverage points. Also drawing from systems thinking, selecting targets that are achievable means that instead of plans that assume ‘best-case scenarios’, plans are more likely to be implemented when minimum essential targets are prioritised that are realistically achievable within the current context and constraints. This includes aiming interventions to the level of intended recipients, whether teachers or students. Both Evans & Popova (2015) and World Bank (2018a) found that teaching needs to be pitched to students’ actual learning levels in order to avoid learners falling behind to the point where they cannot catch up. Thus unrealistic targets – both in curricular goals and planning – is a key contributor to the learning crisis. Another strategy increasingly employed by various developing countries is support to governments to develop national minimum standards for education (for example, see ESARO, 2012, or INEE, 2010). Once minimum standards are developed for the needed inputs, processes and outcomes, detailed costing can be undertaken of what it would take to meet these standards for all children, which can inform planning and budgetary allocation.

Some examples of the kinds of interventions that can help align actors around common strategic targets are listed below (Table 2). Some of these are based on research findings of what leads to improved learning, while others are yet to be evaluated but align with the key principles found to contribute to improved learning. These are meant as a springboard for further brainstorming of strategies appropriate to specific contexts. The list of suggested strategies are followed by an example of how the NGO Pratham in India has been able to align diverse actors around the strategic target of ensuring all primary school children achieve the foundational 3Rs (see Box 4 on pg 29).

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3 ‘Education actors’ refers here to all individuals and groups who have a stake in education and should thus be involved in educational decisions. This would include government systems and other stakeholders like teachers and teacher unions, non-governmental and community organisations representing voices of those with a stake in education (Tikly, 2010). These would be considered to be duty-bearers in the human rights-based framework underpinning UNICEF programming (UNICEF and UNESCO, 2007).
Table 2: Sample strategies to improve learning by creating alignment around strategic targets

- **Make learning the goal**: Advocate to measure the success of education interventions in terms of improvements in learning, e.g. by using ‘learning improvement’ as the ultimate indicator of the success of quality interventions (by educational planners, donors, monitoring officers, teacher unions, and UNICEF’s own quality programming).

- **Generate political will** to clearly define and measure desired learning outcomes, with attention placed on both learning and skills.

- **Support classroom-based research** to deepen understanding of what is happening in the classroom and how this can be strengthened.

- **Strengthen the TOC underlying UNICEF’s own quality programming** as well as planning in the education sector, clearly thinking through how specific inputs and processes will contribute to the desired outcome of holistic learning for all.

- **Convene all players** at national/sub-national/local levels to agree together on minimum essential targets needed for ensuring universal learning, and on how each player can best contribute based on their unique strengths, to ensure that each required factor is being adequately overseen by someone.

- **Create opportunities for diverse actors** – including households, communities, NGOs, the private sector, academia – to contribute their expertise to support learning in fresh ways.

- **Teach to students’ levels**: Use textbooks flexibly and choose learning goals that are realistic based on students’ actual current levels (e.g. “Teaching at the Right Level” pedagogies used by Pratham, India to ensure children are able to achieve foundational literacy and numeracy). This also requires strategies to promote more formative assessment to identify where students are at (which need not necessarily be through testing, but can also be through things like systematic observation of student work or through question-answer approaches).

- **Prioritise interventions that focus on outcomes instead of inputs**, aligning all inputs and managements with a focus on improving teaching and learning.

- **Clarify vision of desired shifts in learning processes and outcomes in easily understandable terms**, for example by creating simple 1-pg summaries of national documents highlighting key quotes that align with global pedagogical best practices, which can be used for advocacy, and for discussions at different levels to help bring alignment in understanding and vision among teachers, education officials, and other stakeholders.

- **Promote systematic involvement of parents in school management and accountability for delivering learning** e.g. through school-level consultations around learning, or by empowering parents to understand and demand quality learning (like India CO’s initiative to create posters with grade-wise learning objectives displayed on school walls so parents know what they can expect).

- **Support governments in developing minimum standards for education inputs, processes and outcomes, followed by calculations of resources required to meet these standards for all children, to inform planning and budgetary allocation.**

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**EMPOWER KEY PLAYERS with the needed motivation and skills to implement learning-centred processes (Teacher-driven)**

The most successful learning systems focus on empowering the key players that affect the quality of outcomes – in this case teachers, students, and parents – to be actively involved in achieving the goal of learning for every child (Asim et al, 2015; Robinson & Winthrop, 2016; Dundar et al, 2014; Evans & Popova, 2015; Hewlett Foundation, 2008; Krishnaratne, White & Carpenter, 2013; Marope, Griffin & Gallagher, 2018). This means moving away from a supply-driven model that tries to find the ‘strategic investments’ that can transform learning outcomes. Effective solutions can only come from the key players engaged in the process, who understand their own context and students better than any external expert. Thus as education planners, all one can do is empower the key players with the needed mastery, mindsets and autonomy to themselves be able to innovate creative new solutions for helping every child learn.
Pratham’s Read India programme provides remedial education for Grade 3-5 children who are lagging behind in foundational reading and math skills, through intensive ‘learning camps’ spread over the year. Launched in 2007 by NGO Pratham, the programme catalyses action from diverse partners to ensure a single target: that all children can read fluently and do basic math confidently. Read India camps are typically led by full-time trained staff, assisted by locally recruited and trained volunteers. Based on the belief that reading is transformative and empowering, Read India seeks to help children not only to learn to read but also to ‘read to learn’, and focuses all of its energies towards achieving this goal.

**Success factors:** A significant part of Pratham’s success has been due to channelling all its energies – including experimentation and partnerships – around key achievable targets. Firstly, Pratham was willing to experiment and rigorously test new teaching-learning models until it found a model that proved effective within existing contexts and resources. Pratham’s pedagogy groups children by ability rather than by age and grade, and tailors learning activities and materials to each group’s actual level rather than trying to complete a standard curriculum, to help children move to the next level (a pedagogy termed ‘Teaching at the Right Level or TaRL). Pratham prioritised not only keeping learning goals achievable by children, but also by teachers, keeping its methodologies, materials and assessment tools simple so that they could be used by a wide variety of individuals in a wide variety of contexts. Pratham’s experiential approach to pedagogy and its commitment to evidence-backed action enabled it to learn constantly from its implementation and evaluation process and to make course corrections based on these learnings, including deciding to scale down at one point to strengthen its implementation model. In this way, Pratham was able to make small, incremental changes that could be made visible in order to convince stakeholders on a wide scale that change is possible. The relentless focus on a single target also made Pratham able to pursue strategic partnerships both with local champions within the government and with long-term donors, both of which helped Pratham to scale its activities.

**Impact:** A 2016 Brookings evaluation of Pratham’s camps in 2013-2016 found significant increase in reading and math levels among grade 3-5 children who attended Read India camps. It found a 27% decrease in the proportion of children who could not identify any letters and a 43% decrease in children who could not recognise any numbers, as well as a 51% increase in children who could read at least grade 2 texts and a 25-33% increase in children able to perform the four basic mathematical operations. Several earlier randomised evaluations of Read India activities have also indicated that its pedagogical approach has led to significant improvement in learning, sometimes doubling normal yearly learning gains, especially for low-performing students (cited in Brookings, 2016). These various studies suggest that providing tailored remedial education over several intensive periods can be an effective and cost-effective way of bridging learning gaps.

**Learnings:** Research conducted by Brookings (2016) and implementing partner J-PAL (see J-PAL, 2019) points out several features that have enabled the success of Pratham’s efforts in improving learning levels. Pratham’s approach has been effective in aligning all efforts around a single target (T), has helped teachers understand data on children’s learning, provided ongoing on-site mentorship and brought teachers together to share learnings and challenges (E), has created a culture of rigorous experimentation and refining (A), and has targeted its efforts specifically on those children falling behind (M). This comprehensive approach was found more effective in improving learning outcomes than merely training teachers in the approach or providing the teaching learning materials alone (J-PAL, 2019). However Pratham’s efforts have placed less emphasis on empowering government teachers to implement its successful methods in regular teaching processes, and thus while it has been successful in increasing learning in the short term, it has been less successful in mainstreaming a long-term learning culture sustainable in the government system. The majority of evaluations of Pratham’s approach have looked at its use by community volunteers or contract teachers, although a few studies have started to look at the effectiveness of the TaRL methodology when implemented by government teachers within the formal school system. For example, Mukherji et al (2014) and Bannerjee et al (2016) found experiments of this approach by government teachers in the states of Haryana and Uttar Pradesh to be promising in showing impacts on foundational learning levels.
First of all, learning-centred outcomes require teacher-centred inputs: adopting a ‘learning lens’ means placing teachers at the centre of reforms. Teachers as the key player with the most direct impact on students’ learning experiences must be prioritised to impact learning levels. Interventions that have proved successful in impacting learning outcomes have prioritised teachers and teaching, recognizing that teachers must be the drivers of change. ‘What works’ is teachers who engage with their students as professionals able to diagnose each student’s needs, take appropriate pedagogical action to help them learn; and assess the effectiveness of that action in order to adjust as needed. Ultimately, learning happens through the relationship between student and teacher, and will take place naturally if children are in an environment where they feel happy, loved, and appropriately challenged. Thus for children to learn, we need teachers who:

- Have experienced and internalised basic principles of learning, and are skilled to facilitate this process for others (mastery)
- Respect and empower their learners (mindsets)
- Have freedom to make their own assessment-based decisions (autonomy)

Research shows that even effective pedagogical models such as ABL in India, which showed positive effects on learning, worked where teachers were capable and committed (i.e. had the needed mastery and mindsets), but worked less well where these characteristics were weak or missing (UNICEF India, 2016). While teacher pay and school conditions are significant constraints in many contexts, as mentioned earlier creative thinking by teachers is indeed possible even in low-resource settings, and was seen in a recent workshop by Pakistan CO when teachers were given the opportunity to think together to find new solutions to complex problems they face (Interview with UNICEF staff). Experience shows that even given constraints like poor salaries, many teachers will perform better if they are given appropriate materials and tools and if the community supports them (Personal correspondence with UNICEF staff).

The key barrier to improved learning identified by UNICEF staff are the low priority given to teachers: leading to issues like ineffective teacher management, teacher training, teacher monitoring, teacher support. Teachers are often blamed for what results from their neglect by the system; the issue is often framed as ‘how to motivate’ teachers, while the issue is as much a matter of ‘how not to demotivate’ them. Teachers cannot facilitate learning-centred processes for children unless they themselves have experienced an environment where they feel valued, happy, and empowered to solve their own problems. As stated by one Education Chief in the region, ‘When we work with teachers in the classroom, we see that they respond. This is true for most teachers around the world: support them and they will try to achieve.’ Adequately supporting teachers to achieve involves measures to address teacher management issues, short-term equipping (e.g. designing tools for teachers that enable them to teach in more effective ways), as well as long-term empowering (e.g.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>% participants who demonstrate knowledge</th>
<th>% participants who demonstrate skills</th>
<th>% participants who transfer into classroom practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical knowledge and discussion</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstration in training</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice and feedback in training</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coaching in classroom settings</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Effectiveness of different methods of teacher professional development
(From Joyce and Showers, 2002; cited in Marope, Griffin & Gallagher, 2018)
enabling them to decide on and implement their own small solutions to issues they identify). In terms of teacher management, Best, Tournier and Chimier (2018) offer a useful discussion of how to address common issues faced by developing countries related to teacher management, including teacher pay, deployment, working hours, training, evaluation, and so on. In terms of short-term equipping, teacher training in the region is typically taught in ways that not only contradict the very pedagogical approach it is trying to promote, but also contradict research evidence of what actually produces change in teachers (see Table 3 above taken from Marope, Griffin & Gallagher, 2018). Rather than the often-used one-off face-to-face cascade training in a venue removed from schools, what has been found more effective in changing teachers’ practice is a combination of modelling good teaching practices with actual students, along with classroom-based support to help teachers implement these practices. The findings below do not mean that we should dispense with theory, but rather that to help teachers grow we need to ensure adequate coaching and monitoring within classroom settings.

In terms of long-term empowering, Hardman et al (2011) present a useful overview of what a systemic approach to teacher education would involve. They argue that teacher education should be treated holistically, with a seamless continuum between pre-service and in-service training (ideally linked to promotion), integration of distance education and face-to-face delivery, and classroom-based support to teachers. According to the authors, two key factors that can

Table 4: Sample strategies to improve learning by prioritising teachers and teaching

- Implement structured pedagogical interventions designed to strengthen teaching and learning, by organising materials, training and supervision around a specific pedagogical model designed to change students’ learning experiences and adapt teaching to student learning levels (like Activity-Based Learning in India or Early Grades Reading in Nepal).
- Showcase ‘outliers’ or on-the-ground models that have proven effective in improving pedagogy and learning, so people can draw lessons applicable to their contexts
- Show teachers examples of what good teaching practice looks like in a real classroom similar to theirs (e.g. through videos of effective teachers)
- Classroom-based, teacher-to-teacher coaching helps mitigate the negatives of cascade training by building teachers’ skills within their classroom context, by someone they can relate to who is only slightly ahead of them and thus can offer tried-and-tested suggestions achievable in their context (e.g. in-class teacher support in Rajasthan, India)
- Explore out-of-the-box ways to empower teachers with the needed mastery and mindsets for implementing learning-centred pedagogies. E.g. Shift from one-off training programmes, to a combination of 1. Demonstration of effective practice (live, thru videos, or good teaching tools), 2. Coaching within their class setting to help them implement these practices (by a teacher recognised as effective from within or outside their school)
- Give teachers access to good teaching tools that they can choose from or adapt, to help them implement effective teaching practices within their contexts: e.g. online sample lesson plans or activity banks for different learning goals, assessment banks for different learning goals, easy-to-use teacher guides
- Enable teachers as professionals to collectively engage with basic principles of learning. As noted in the CO workshops, it could be as simple as a discussion on key learning principles like how to move students from content recall to higher order analysis or creativity, as in Bloom’s Taxonomy. (E.g. CFS teachers’ network in Chennai, India)
- Recognise and appreciate effective teachers by clarifying standards of good teaching practice, and finding simple ways to appreciate teachers found effective by their peers/ HM (e.g. choosing them as the ‘Teacher Learning Coordinator’ for the school, publicizing their success through magazines or online videos, using those teachers for creating videos as mentioned above)
- Free teachers to focus on learning: Harness help from extra administrative staff, qualified community members, etc. so teachers are freed from non-teaching tasks and can focus their time and energy on ensuring learning
Empowering teachers: Mobile Teacher Meetings (MTM) in Nepal

**Success factors:** The ‘Creating Learning Communities through Mobile Teacher Meetings’ (MTM) pilot demonstrated a positive in-service training mechanism for encouraging peer-to-peer learning among primary school teachers. It was piloted over 8 months and targeted 224 primary teachers in four clusters of Nepal. Teacher-led, cluster-based and using activity cards through which teachers set their own agenda around priority problems they helped to identify, the MTM showed how by sharing classroom experience and learning lessons collaboratively, teachers could ‘own’ both their analyses and solutions. Meetings were facilitated by resource persons, and learning agendas were developed based on activity cards written by experts with feedback from teachers on themes drawn from their classrooms. Follow-up plans for in-class action that applied workshop learnings were agreed upon, and data on those experiences were systematically collected through ‘evidence folders’ that were eventually shared.

**Impact:** Post-project evaluations reveal that teachers were excited to learn from each other, that working as teams became more effective, and that the use of evidence folders proved effective as a means of recording classroom change. After MTM discussions about how children learn, there appeared to be a decrease in the use of lecture method and increase in students’ participation in learning. While it was too short-lived to show significant impact on learning levels, there were at least indications that greater impact was possible with a more sustained engagement.

**Learnings:** At the more macro level, the MTM pilot fell short – there was insufficient time and attention given to supporting teachers to own the process so that instead of following pre-established activity cards, they could eventually set the agenda themselves. Global research has shown that teachers around the world learn best through a collaborative process of experience → reflection → trialling → further reflection → progressive change. Based on the MTM pilot evaluation, this did not appear to have happened, nor expressly to have been planned. The MTM was a first step in the potential mainstreaming of teacher ‘learning communities’ – which have a shown a high potential for enhancing learning levels.

Contribute to teachers’ sense of professionalism and classroom practice, and thus to students’ learning achievement, is school-based teacher development, along with management and career structures that lead to consistent high quality teacher performance.

Table 4 above lists some examples of the kinds of interventions that have been found successful in improving learning outcomes by prioritising teachers and teaching (i.e. building teachers’ skills and motivation). This is followed by one positive example from Nepal of how the Mobile Teacher Meetings innovation attempted to empower teachers (Box 5).

In addition to empowering teachers, other interventions that have been found effective in improving learning outcomes centre around empowering the other two players most key to learning outcomes: students and parents (Dundar et al, 2014; Hewlett Foundation, 2008; Krishnaratne, White & Carpenter 2013; Murnane & Ganiman, 2014; Rose & Alcott, 2015; World Bank, 2018a). Research has found families to be key determinants of learning outcomes: both as potential motivators or barriers (e.g. Krishnaratne, White & Carpenter 2013). For example, Murnane and Ganimian (2014) cite research from Pakistan that found providing parents and students information about school quality, returns to schooling or students’ learning levels had a positive impact on improving learning levels, as did training parents in India on how to stimulate their children’s learning at home. Other examples of the kinds of interventions found effective in improving learning by empowering parents and students are listed below (Table 5).

**ASSESS & ADJUST CONTINUOUSLY:**

**Promote a culture of assessment-based practice at all levels (Evidence-informed)**

Agile learning systems are able to constantly assess the current scenario (including the results...
of previous efforts as well as any unforeseen circumstances), and make needed adjustments to previously-planned actions. This requires strong systems able to assess student and teacher performance (through large-scale assessments, formative assessments, and teacher monitoring systems), to effectively measure progress against the minimum essential targets identified, and communicate these in a manner easily understandable and usable by the key players who can impact results. ‘What works’ is an iterative planning approach: a constant cycle of ‘learning by doing’ or ‘improvement through reflection’ where each level of actors is empowered to implement small strategic tweaks, assess results, and adjust their actions or goals as necessary (Robinson & Winthrop, 2016; Dundar et al, 2014; Hewlett Foundation, 2008; UNESCO & Brookings, 2013; World Bank, 2018b).

From a systems perspective, the starting point would be a baseline assessment of existing classroom practices, and a broad situation analysis of all factors affecting this, including existing structures, systems, policies and plans, to inform future efforts (Hardman et al, 2011). This also requires promoting a culture of evidence-informed action at all levels: ensuring reliable information on the performance of students and teachers communicated in a manner easily understandable and usable for each level, and ensuring this evidence is discussed and used to make needed adjustments to action at each level. Murnane & Ganimian (2014) highlight studies from India and Liberia that found giving teachers diagnostic information about their students’ learning with general tips of how to improve did not significantly impact learning levels unless teachers were also given clear and specific guidelines about what they needed to change in their teaching. UNICEF could play a key role in helping ensure both these.

It could prioritise developing robust assessment systems at both national and classroom levels that measure competencies instead of only content (as being encouraged in several South Asian countries like Afghanistan and Pakistan as part of the ROSA-led South Asia Assessment Knowledge Platform titled ‘All Children Learning’, which aims to support the development of national assessment systems). UNICEF could also support efforts to communicate key assessment findings in brochures or web portals that are easily understandable by key players – such as the Statsilk dashboard that provides user-friendly, interactive data visualisations and maps on learning in countries like Pakistan (see Figure 4).

### Table 5: Sample strategies to improve learning by empowering students and parents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Invest in early childhood health and education so that children arrive at school healthy, happy, and excited to continue learning.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involve children and adolescents in making decisions that affect them, in classrooms, schools and at other decision-making levels.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promote technologies that empower students to take control of their own learning by tailoring activities to children’s assessed learning levels. For example, UNICEF ROSA (2019) discusses different scenarios where technologies can be used to support learning for children who have typically been harder to reach, like out of school youth, migrating and displaced youth, or adolescent girls.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empower parents to keep schools and systems accountable for learning, e.g. by displaying on school walls a simple list of key outcomes every child should know at each level, so parents know what they can demand (e.g. like in India), or by involving parents in school committees that have the monitoring of learning in their Terms of Reference.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involve mothers to discuss what is happening in the classroom, and to brainstorm simple ways they could promote learning in the home (e.g. fun learning games they could play with their children, that could help both children and parents learn basic skills).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invite community members to share their knowledge or skills to enrich children’s learning experiences and connect learning to life outside the school, as done in the Mother Tongue Based Multilingual Education programme implemented in Jharkhand India with UNICEF support (See Pattanayak, 2017) for practical suggestions on how UNICEF Jharkhand encouraged schools to invite different community members as ‘Resource Persons’ to share their skills in storytelling, art, music, toymaking, acting, etc.).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Although the Statsilk example above provides more robust data analysis (including inequalities in learning outcomes) than is usually available regarding learning in South Asia, there is need for further developing usable tools that not only indicate what learning children have achieved, but also what percentage of children can do what, to enable follow-up action (like ASER’s instrument does for a narrow set of literacy and numeracy competencies).

UNICEF could also help develop suggestions for teachers or other stakeholders of what they could do differently to improve results, and ensure discussions happen at different levels (from national to classroom level) to review progress and think of needed adjustments to further improve progress. Such discussions could help focus targeted support to those districts or students who require greater support. This is similar to the collaborative planning approach promoted by the best International Baccalaureate (IB) schools around the world, where principals meet regularly with each teacher to discuss child-specific goals and progress (informed by evidence), and teachers meet regularly to brainstorm together how best to support every child’s learning (described in International Baccalaureate Organization, 2014). This type of ‘improvement through reflection’ at each level would help move towards a greater ‘learning culture’ or a ‘culture of R&D’ (Robinson & Winthrop, 2016) in South Asia.

Some examples of strategies that could help bring in more of an evidence-informed culture in South Asia education systems are listed below (Table 6). This is followed by example from India aimed at assessing and adjusting instruction to support students falling behind in achieving grade-level skills (see Box 6).
Table 6: Sample strategies to improve learning by promoting assessment-based practice

- Help countries design holistic assessments that test children’s abilities instead of merely memorisation of content (e.g. by inviting international experts or agencies, or creating a database of sample assessment items that test skills instead of content for common learning goals, that teachers or systems could draw from)

- Create opportunities for discussion and use of data at all levels, to inform curricular, pedagogical, or other decisions that affect learning. At school level, such discussions could form part of cluster-level teacher meetings facilitated by teacher support personnel.

- Identify top barriers to learning by analysing research evidence, and take targeted steps to specifically minimise those barriers

- Help governments identify a short list of key indicators for tracking students’ and teachers’ performance (e.g. 3Rs and 4Es), and make these freely available online so that all players become familiar and can use these to guide their own practice and that of those they oversee (UNESCO & Brookings, 2013)

- Opportunities for teachers together to look at assessment data to analyse what they need to do differently

- Help teachers implement and use classroom-based formative assessments, by developing simple tools teachers can use to utilise evidence to inform their teaching – as being promoted by UNESCO International Institute for Capacity-building in Africa (see UNESCO IICBA, 2019, and teacher toolkits available on IICBA’s website)

- Equip teachers to identify which students in their class are struggling and require individual support, and help free times for teachers to focus on such students (e.g. suggest good learning games or websites that can occupy and benefit students who are on pace, while teachers give extra individualised attention to students who require it)

- Encourage more evidence-informed decision-making in UNICEF’s own programming, by surveying research not only of UNICEF-supported programmes, but also international research by academics or NGOs on areas relevant to inform programming decisions.

MOST TO THE LEAST: Democratic relationships that prioritise the least (in age, performance or status) (Equity-lens)

Another key principle found in many efforts successful in impacting learning is a democratic culture that prioritises the ‘least’ in terms of age, performance or status (Dundar et al, 2014; Glewwe & Muralidharan, 2016; Hewlett Foundation, 2008; Rose & Alcott, 2015; The Education Commission, 2017; UNESCO & Brookings, 2013). First, successful interventions have given the greatest priority (in terms of resources or the best teachers) to ensure all learners acquire foundational skills in early grades, which has an impact on children’s learning achievement and learning gaps for years to come. Secondly, interventions that have successfully impacted learning have placed an explicit focus on equity, highlighting and addressing inequalities in achievement – both in assessing performance levels (of students and teachers), and in allocating need-based resources to those who are falling behind (in terms of particular students, schools or districts). Thirdly, this principle also means moving towards decentralisation: giving more power or status for those typically overlooked by society – by title or community (e.g. elevating and empowering teachers and parents, or marginalised communities).

All these measures assume a more democratic culture at all levels – starting with schools. Thus equity-oriented planning would focus on building strong democratic school leaders who are willing to empower teachers’ creativity, and to involve students and their parents (the end-users of education) to help hold schools accountable for learning. Dundar et al (2014) found that given the wide disparities evident...
A TEAM RESPONSE TO SOUTH ASIA’S LEARNING CRISIS

Level-based Learning, Maharashtra, India: Assessing and adjusting for those who haven’t achieved grade-level skills

Introduction: The Level-Based Learning (LBL) programme in Maharashtra, India works with in-school Grade 5 students who are struggling to manage subjects at the upper primary level having not been able to acquire expected foundational language and math skills in early years; and whose teachers often lack sufficient competencies to help them bridge the gap between what they know and what they need to know at the higher level. As a result, they lose motivation to engage, fail to grasp the basics of subject contents and ultimately fall behind and drop out. The programme is structured around remedial learning packages, reflecting different levels of student readiness or ability with instructional approaches tailored appropriately to those. Daily classes, typically over an 18 month period, last around 45 minutes and cover three levels (groups) of competencies in language and mathematics, based on the requirements of the curriculum from Grade 1 through 5. The programme overall is thus logically sequenced in terms of knowledge and skills to be acquired and on which the next level can build.

Impact: According to internal data from the pilot in two districts, the percentage of students acquiring a level of language proficiency between 75-100% moved from a baseline of 19% to 63% in one case, from 10% to 26% in the other In mathematics, the progress was similar: students scoring more than 75% rose from 1% to 21% and from 1% to 8% in the two districts respectively. Based on previous pilots, the programme estimates that 50% of the total student population of 260,000 in the upper primary grades will be identified for inclusion. At the same time, positive outcomes relevant to learning as immediate facilitators have been reported and are both valid and important to note with respect to particularly to a programme like the LBL: increased attendance of students, engagement with lessons and confidence as learners; teachers expressing a more learner-friendly attitude (we “shout” less); students not eligible for the LBL expressing interest in enrolling, presumably on the basis of good reviews.

Success factors: Tailoring the programme to learners is central to the success if the programme and key to this has been doing so on the basis of readiness assessments, allowing for differentiation in student grouping, teaching approaches and materials; and regular diagnostic assessments of students as they come progressively to gain control over the core language (reading, writing, comprehension) and math skills. Mid- and endline-assessments of learning progress in this regard are also important in contributing directly to pedagogical practice: teachers are able to manage their methods on the basis of evidence of children’s actual strengths and weaknesses as individual learners. Further, groups can be reassigned on the basis of progress made. In both cases, children’s trajectories and rates of learning need not be predetermined or their characterization as ‘slow learners’ cast in stone. Moreover, the mixed methods of the LBL allow for differentiation of learning styles: each child works on an individualised basis with a workbook and teacher guidance; groups of children work cooperatively through activity cards, with teachers facilitating them on the basis of their specific learning level rather than the regular grade-based curriculum.

A critical component of the LBL is its attention to supporting teachers as competent professionals as they apply this challenging programme to deliver well. Such support can be key in terms of helping them maintain commitment to the work of supporting the kind of flexibly it demands. Two aspects of the programme are key in this respect:

- Initial training in the theoretical foundations of language and math, the LBL rationale and structure, and its application through practicums, effectively provides teachers access to the “thinking behind” the programme - its underlying principles and assumptions -- and, in this way, should serve to support their ability and willingness to taking independent decisions as capable practitioners and also motivate their continuing to stay as teachers;

- Elaboration of the training through continued support of Resource Persons, also trained in LBL and given short-term experience in its application, providing follow-up demonstration of methods, observation and feedback of teaching practice, and guidance in planning and assessment should serve to consolidate their learning.

Learnings: A multi-grade classroom, of very mixed and in many ways vulnerable learners, using responsive, individualised methods requires teachers to be available, appropriately trained and motivated to engage with it; to “own” it. Achieving these criteria in the LBL has been a challenge: schools with a small teaching staff unable to allocate any fulltime to the LBL classroom; insufficient in-school mentoring support; teachers reported to be “deprioritising” it in favour of the normal programme. None of these are surprising; monitoring and adjusting for them is crucial, but difficult to do without the support of the system (hence the importance of a systems approach) and flexibility with respect to timelines and budgets where the programme is externally funded (a challenge for UNICEF).
in South Asia, decentralisation reforms which promote a more democratic culture hold promise for improving the governance of education systems in the region. They found that technical solutions for improving school quality will only work if larger issues of governance and accountability are addressed. Ultimately this kind of democratic learning culture is what we hope to see in classrooms and which must thus be modelled at all levels.

Below are some examples of strategies to promote more democratic governance of learning in both schools and systems (Table 7). This is followed by one example from Bangladesh of an effort that uses innovative learning principles to reach some of the hardest to reach learners (see Box 7).

Throughout Sections I and II, various outliers have been presented in Boxes 3-10 that implement principles of a TEAM approach to successfully bring about changes in learning process and/or outcomes. All these on-the-ground examples are worth attention for the learning-focused principles they demonstrate for tailoring basic education to meet the needs and levels of diverse learners, allowing thousands of children to flourish within diverse contexts and circumstances. Drawing from these key principles highlighted by both research and experience, future attempts to positively impact learning would benefit from teams at each level asking similar questions:

1. **T** – What are the most strategic priorities for us to achieve this year/this month?
2. **E** – What actions could help us to empower key players more, both in classrooms and in our own office culture?
3. **A** – What measures can we take to promote more of an evidence-informed culture in government systems and in our own work?
4. **M** – How can we give greatest attention to the least prioritised, both in our own programming and in our advocacy for government priorities?

Creative team thinking on the above questions at every level has the potential to help promote short-term high-impact strategies for showing improvement in learning among diverse learners. It could help address the symptoms of South Asia’s learning crisis, but would not necessarily solve the roots of the problem of why so many children are being excluded in the first place, or why so many are in school but not learning. Addressing the latter would require longer-term strategies to shift mindsets towards mainstreaming a TEAM learning culture in South Asia – which is what the following section discusses.

### Table 7: Sample strategies to improve learning by promoting democratic relationships

- **Build capacity of education planners and managers** to analyse data to identify specific districts or groups that are struggling in learning and require more focused support (e.g. UNICEF support given to NEAS in Pakistan to analyse and use learning data for targeting support to bridge learning gaps).
- **Strengthen feedback loops:** Invite 360 degree feedback or anonymous suggestions from intended recipients to inform future interventions for that recipient e.g., through suggestion boxes, online questionnaires, phone rating apps, websites like ratemyteacher.com, or other feedback loops (like Amazon.com or Uber have tried to ensure quality through transparent feedback loops where a person’s performance affects their rating and thus future profit).
- **Prioritise interventions to build strong democratic school leaders**, empowering them to take leadership of efforts to improve learning levels in the school.
- **Empower parents to keep schools accountable** for ensuring their children learn skills that will benefit them in the future – like the ‘Data Must Speak’ initiative in Nepal and other countries that sought to strengthen district profiles, school profiles and monitoring information in order to improve accountability, provide targeted resource allocation and pedagogic support to struggling learners, and inform planning and budgeting at sub-district, district and national levels (Jarousse, Prouty & Rooke, 2019).
Prioritising the least advantaged: Ability Based Accelerated Learning in Bangladesh

- **Introduction**: Ability Based Accelerated Learning (ABAL) is a model of teaching strategies and evaluation methods that forms part of Second Chance Education (SCE), a multi-model programme of the Government of Bangladesh aimed at providing quality basic education to out of school children (both those never enrolled and those who have dropped out). Adapted from the Indian model of Activity-Based Learning (ABL), ABAL targets out-of-school children aged 8-14 years old, providing them the opportunity to complete the primary cycle and enter or re-enter the formal school in a relatively short period, usually 45 months depending on the learner’s pace. It works through learning centres affiliated with local primary schools and managed by locally recruited teachers who have been trained through a 21-day foundation course in interactive teaching and participatory learning methods.

- **Success factors**: The ABAL design is consistent with good practice in a number of ways, chief among these its focus internally on child-centredness: in its curriculum, teaching-learning materials and approaches to assessment. Supported by relevant and regular professional development through foundation and refresher training as well as intensive academic support inside the classroom, Master Trainers, supervisors and teachers appear to have been able to keep this perspective in view. Importantly, different instructor-based, peer and self-directed assessment modalities are available to track learners’ progress on a regular basis and lessons are adjusted accordingly. Another key to ABAL’s success is reported to be its engagement with communities – important in any school setting, but especially where the notion and value of education itself are not well established. Meetings and home visits are regular; families in turn support resource mobilisation and co-curricular activities.

- **Learnings**: One caveat appears to be some inconsistency between the theory and practice of the programme that may lessen somewhat its effect. On the positive side, the programme is framed as learner-centred in aiming to engage learners themselves in setting the direction of their learning, based on their own experience and interests. In its practice, however, it appears more traditional. Students can be assigned to fixed grade levels and teachers are provided pre-determined modules that define unit-wise learning outcomes, contents, methods and materials; the competencies to be attained are listed and the expected duration of lessons for each subject set – suggesting an accelerated education, versus accelerated learning, modality. ABAL is challenged to a degree by being included in the country’s 4th Primary Education Development Programme under ‘access and participation’ rather than quality as such, implying a diminished emphasis on action explicitly aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of learning-oriented processes and outcomes. Inputs to reform curriculum design, teaching strategies and evaluation methods might well result in improvement in all of these, but without expressly recognizing learning outcomes as the benchmark indicator against which success is judged, it may not happen.

As was evident in India’s ABL evaluation (2016), transitioning any learning-centred programme from one context to another is complicated by the necessary condition that all of those involved – children, teachers, parents – have full ownership of the process. It will be critical for any attempt to adopt the SCE/ABAL model in another setting to ensure recognizing the underlying characteristics what is being done, why they are working – especially how they fit together. Understanding why and how ABAL is internally congruent in its design and implementation is key.
A key finding from Phase 2 is that there are no ‘silver bullets’ or single interventions that can transform learning; changing learning processes and outcomes requires simultaneous long-term efforts to mainstream a learning culture in South Asian education. The question pervasive across CO workshops was ‘why’: why after so many efforts by governments, UNICEF and others in the region, do we still see so little change in learning processes and outcomes? The simplest answer in some ways is that it is difficult to change behaviour. An educational strategy that is effective today or in one context may not work tomorrow or in a different context.
context. Teachers and other education actors at all levels require the needed mastery, mindsets, and freedom to experiment with creative new strategies to achieve desired outcomes and make adjustments if necessary based on their particular context, since they are the ones that understand their context best. Especially given the uncertainties of South Asia’s context, ensuring learning will require mainstreaming a learning culture where actors at all levels can constantly reassess what targets are achievable within current circumstances, and appropriately adapt actions to assure all learners in their context meet minimum learning goals.

Mainstreaming this kind of learning culture is more sustainable in the long term than specific interventions that could potentially yield short-term changes (until... the next bureaucrat change or natural disaster or conflict situation or other uncertainty as often happens in South Asia). Both short-term and long-term efforts are needed. Working slowly behind-the-scenes to shift South Asia’s education culture, though it may not yield immediate visible results, is similar to the ‘flywheel effect’ described by Jim Collins in his analysis of what makes organisations go from ‘good to great’. The ‘flywheel’ is a metaphor that could apply to the challenge of bringing change in any complex system like South Asian education systems or even a single school:

Picture a huge, heavy flywheel—a massive metal disk mounted horizontally on an axle, about 30 feet in diameter, 2 feet thick, and weighing about 5,000 pounds. Now imagine that your task is to get the flywheel rotating on the axle as fast and long as possible. Pushing with great effort, you get the flywheel to inch forward, moving almost imperceptibly at first. You keep pushing and, after two or three hours of persistent effort, you get the flywheel to complete one entire turn. You keep pushing, and the flywheel begins to move a bit faster, and with continued great effort, you move it around a second rotation. You keep pushing in a consistent direction. Three turns ... four ... five ... six ... the flywheel builds up speed ... seven ... eight ... you keep pushing ... nine ... ten ... it builds momentum ... eleven ... twelve ... moving faster with each turn ... twenty ... thirty ... fifty ... a hundred. Then, at some point—breakthrough! The momentum of the thing kicks in in your favour, hurling the flywheel forward, turn after turn ... whoosh! ... its own heavy weight working for you. You’re pushing no harder than during the first rotation, but the flywheel goes faster and faster. Each turn of the flywheel builds upon work done earlier, compounding your investment of effort. A thousand times faster, then ten thousand, then a hundred thousand. The huge heavy disk flies forward, with almost unstoppable momentum. (Collins, 2001, p.164-165)

For any complex outcome like turning a huge flywheel, hatching an egg, or shifting South Asia’s education system, change will not happen through one single grand programme or ‘miracle moment’. It will occur through a quiet, deliberate process of figuring out what needs to be done, and then simply doing it, quietly and consistently. Unimpressive attempts to create this culture of ‘thinking and doing’ at every level has a better potential of working to impact learning, than publicised attempts to push the flywheel in one direction, then another, then yet another, lurching it back and forth in opposite directions resulting in little momentum and little results. Mainstreaming a learning culture in South Asia would be similar to the Education Commission’s call to develop collaborative learning teams focused on improving education outcomes, in classrooms, in schools, and at all levels of the system (2019). Developing such learning teams that can ‘think and do’ does not necessarily involve hiring new staff, but rather rightly diagnosing the challenges, understanding each actors’ strengths and how they can best contribute to learning, and aligning each actor’s role on the areas of greatest need. Long-term efforts to mainstream a learning culture must target both shifts in systems as discussed in the previous section, as well as shifts in mindsets, as discussed in the following section.
STIR Education focuses on empowering teachers by building teacher motivation, in order to shift teachers’ mindsets and practices to improve student learning. Started in 2012, STIR now works with teachers in 4 Indian states and in Uganda. STIR believes that teachers represent the solution, not the problem, in helping students achieve learning outcomes. Teachers embark on a three-year journey to become ‘Teacher Changemakers’, where they select and implement some of the best teacher ‘micro-innovations’ identified by STIR in order to inspire teachers, based on the belief that the most effective method of change is to build on what the best teachers and schools are already doing. Thereafter STIR along with government partnership facilitates teacher networks, where teachers meet monthly to discuss key classroom principles and learn from each others’ innovations.

STIR seeks to increase teacher motivation by tweaking incentive structures, using four non-financial incentives that can motivate improved teacher performance (Brinkmann, 2016b):

1. Recognition: Innovative teachers are nominated by their principal to attend a training held in a 5-star hotel
2. Growth: Selected teachers get additional training from international experts and get the opportunity to take a leadership role in their school and district
3. Camaraderie: Selected Teacher Changemakers get invited to attend national summits and meet with elite colleagues from across their district every three months.
4. Accountability: Each Teacher Changemaker is assigned a coach who personally calls them before and after their launch.

By initially using these non-financial incentives to build extrinsic motivation, STIR ultimately seeks to build intrinsic motivation among teachers, by shifting their identity to begin to see themselves as ‘Teacher Changemakers’, which begins to shift their mindset to believe that they can and should innovate in their classrooms.

A longitudinal evaluation of STIR’s programming in Delhi and Uttar Pradesh (UP) found that in Delhi, STIR’s approach led to improved math learning outcomes (0.1 standard deviation) and increased teacher motivation, including effects on a sub-index measuring teachers’ ‘growth mindset’ (IDinsight, 2018). However in UP no statistically significant effects were found on teacher motivation, student learning, or classroom practices, suggesting that while STIR’s approach can work, its effectiveness depends on context, where context may include geography, education systems, financing and staffing, or program components. Overall, the result shown was similar in effect size to other teacher training and incentive interventions in low- and middle-income countries (McEwan 2015).

One effort to quietly turn the education flywheel is the NGO STIR education in India, which seeks to empower government teachers by offering different incentive structures (see Box 8). Ultimately, change in South Asia’s education culture will occur from the accumulation of thousands of such unseen attempts to ‘turn the flywheel’: to shift the culture in a particular direction, until momentum leads to breakthrough.

Shifting mindsets

If the key to quality learning relates to changing the nature of teacher-student interactions, then any effort to improve the quality of learning must tackle the cultural mindsets underlying the nature of relationships in South Asian classrooms. Many of the barriers to change identified by COs relate to lack of resources and more to cultural mindsets. Key barriers identified during CO Workshops include systemic inertia or resistance to change, over-reliance on national rote-based exams as indicators of system effectiveness, and unwillingness to engage with deeper issues of learning among both systems and parents, with input-focused interventions that favour quick fixes such as infrastructural solutions over tackling complex long-term issues like poor learning. All of these issues, including the problem of achieving equity and learning posed
at the beginning of this report, relate as much to resources as to cultural mindsets pervasive across South Asian systems and societies – and the latter is more difficult to address. Even CFS programming, according to UNICEF’s global CFS evaluation (2009), placed greater emphasis on infrastructural aspects, whereas what truly made schools child-friendly were less tangible aspects like child-centred processes and democratic relationships – which are rooted in longstanding mindsets. This may shed some light on why various educational investments in South Asia, even where they have targeted key areas like teachers, assessments or community involvement, have failed to bring significant change in core learning factors like skills or motivation of teachers and others in the system, or democratic relationships – because little attempt has been made to tackle the mindsets in which existing practices in these areas are rooted.

In particular, mainstreaming a TEAM learning culture, found to be essential for bringing lasting improvements in learning processes and outcomes, requires 4 specific mindsets that are evident in many successful education interventions, but which have yet to take root in many parts of South Asia:

1. **Mission mindset**: Relentlessly pursuing learning-related targets requires a belief in the purpose of education as creating a more egalitarian society, not just getting ahead. This informs the deeper commitment with which individuals working at any level of the education system approach their work. For example, Brinkmann (2016a) found that only a few of the government teachers interviewed went into teaching out of a love for children or desire to contribute; the majority chose teaching out of convenience or ease of entry, which affects their willingness to put in the extra effort needed for implementing new pedagogies.

2. **Democratic mindset**: For people in charge to be willing to empower key players typically seen as ‘below’ them (whether officials giving power to teachers, or teachers giving power to students), they require a belief in knowledge as constructed collaboratively rather than transmitted from an ‘expert’. For example, if a teacher supervisor truly believes that teachers are capable of coming up with the most implementable strategies to improve student learning, they will prioritise facilitating teachers to think together to come up with their own solutions for change, rather than simply telling them what the best practices are.

3. **Outcome-oriented mindset**: Being willing to constantly assess and adjust practice in order to ensure that outcomes are achieved, requires feeling responsible for achieving outcomes rather than simply completing tasks. For example, research in India suggests that many teachers’ primary objective is ‘completing the syllabus’ regardless of whether or not students have actually learned (Dyer et al, 2004). Ramachandran (2005) describes how school inspectors tend to view their work similarly: they visit schools merely to check registers, collect data, or have a cup of tea, rarely offering the kind of academic support to teachers intended on paper.

4. **Equity mindset**: It is a deeper belief in human equality – in the worth and learning capacity of all humans – that causes one to feel bothered if someone faces unequal opportunities. One Education Specialist mentioned how in one part of South Asia he saw an autistic non-verbal child chained on the street, which is ultimately driven by a belief that children with special needs are incapable of learning.

Specific interventions aiming at shifting teaching and learning processes have often come up against these missing mindsets as a key cultural barrier. For example, an evaluation of Sri Lanka’s UNICEF-supported Child-Friendly Approach programme found that ‘education reform involves changing culture, changing the attitudes and behaviours of all stakeholders involved in its delivery,’ which the evaluation was not sure was happening (UNICEF Sri Lanka, 2016, p.12). Similarly, the evaluation of India’s child-friendly ABL initiatives found that since teachers and officials had often not been enabled to understand and internalise the principles and beliefs underlying the ABL approach, ABL
programmes typically get reduced to a focus on the procedural aspects of such pedagogies, which has affected the quality of implementation and long-term sustainability of ABL in different states (UNICEF, 2016b). Looking back at recent decades, UNICEF has supported various trainings for teachers and other stakeholders on quality-related issues, including on improving teaching. However unless teachers experience a different culture from their authorities (trainer, school principal, or school inspector), their classroom culture will remain unchanged – classrooms will remain dominated by a top-down hierarchical culture. Teachers will ultimately teach in the manner they have been taught in their own schooling or pre-service and in-service training. Training programmes which UNICEF has supported as a key strategy for improving teaching most often do not enable teachers to experience a different culture either inside or outside the training hall. Thus they fail to empower teachers with the needed mastery and mindsets for changing their practice, and ultimately do not translate into changed learning experiences.

Little research has been done on how to change cultural mindsets about education, especially in a South Asian context. Brinkmann (2016a), one of the few studies from the region on this topic, suggests that mindsets can begin to change when individuals undergo changes in their experiences and in their structures. Firstly, individuals can change when they participate in ‘transformative trainings’ that enable them to experience radically different cultural mindsets than the ones they have typically experienced in society. They can then reflect together on these jarring experiences to unearth their own subconscious assumptions, and together think of small doable changes they can implement within their existing contexts (see Figure 5).

It is this kind of Experience-Reflect-Act model that creates opportunities for adults to question their sub-conscious assumptions and choose to practice a different mindset, as argued by transformative learning theory (Brinkmann, 2015). Two examples of such transformative trainings from India are Rupantar, which sought to challenge teachers’ attitudes towards tribal children in the state of Orissa (OPEPA, 1997), and Mahila Samakhya, which sought to empower women and combat discriminatory gender attitudes in several Indian states (Ramachandran, 1998). One option for initiating such shifts in mindsets could be to begin facilitating such transformative trainings for a pool of high-

![Figure 5: Transformative training for shifting mindsets](image-url)
skilled teacher educators, who could then facilitate such experiences for teachers and others in the system. Research has found that experience has proven effective in shifting mindsets around education innovations even among senior authorities and academics: Fennell, Duraisamy and Shanmugam (2015) found that in the story of upscaling ABL in India, ‘the power of experiencing the ABL pedagogy was the key lever that convinced teachers and professional educationists, within both national and international contexts.’ The four mindsets identified above will be hard to take root unless teachers experience such mindsets from their superiors: unless they are treated as if they have a crucial role in contributing to positive social change (mission mindset), have worthwhile ideas to contribute (democratic mindset), that their job is more than just completing the syllabus (outcome-oriented mindset), or that they matter as individuals (equity mindset).

Alongside such transformative learning opportunities, another measure needed to help change mindsets is to create structures that embody (or at least allow) the new mindsets. At present, even a well-meaning teacher wishing to experiment with more learning-centred pedagogies will immediately come up against numerous structures that contradict it. These include the pressure to race through the syllabus, school timetables that compartmentalise knowledge, classroom organisation that forces the teacher to take centre-stage, examinations that reward knowledge recall rather than knowledge construction, school inspectors that value disciplined classrooms and neat records more than students engaged in meaningful learning. Someone interested in changing mindsets could seek out small structural changes they could bring about within their locus of influence, whether in a state, district, or even a single classroom. For example, by initiating small tweaks in the way classrooms or timetables are organised, the behaviours on which teachers are rewarded, or the criteria on which children are assessed, one could begin to create new structures that gently nudge teachers towards desired beliefs and behaviours without them even realizing it. Kalikayatna in India is one example of an approach that seeks to change both teachers’ experiences and structures in order to bring changes in government teachers’ beliefs and practice (see Box 9).

One strategy that combines both the transformative learning approach and experiencing new structures is creating spaces for teachers to discuss with their peers small innovative changes they have tried that have brought improvements in their students’ learning – which is one approach that has been found effective in shifting teachers’ beliefs and practice (UNICEF interview). When teachers get a chance to be exposed to small ‘tweaks’ that have proven effective in a context similar to theirs, they become more motivated to try such small changes in their own practice, and once they experience positive results from trying these small changes, this also helps to shift their mindsets. This enables teachers to practise a ‘democratic mindset’ where they come up with solutions collaboratively with their peers, instead of having solutions handed to them by an ‘expert’ – which is ultimately the democratic learning culture that we want teachers to internalise and pass on to their students.

**Shifting environments (and thus mindsets and behaviours)**

Ultimately changing people’s behaviour in a system requires a thoughtful systems analysis of what key mindsets are driving current behaviours, what an alternative desired system might look like, and what kind of strategic leverage points could help shift the system from the former to the latter. Figure 6 below shows one possible diagram to map the mindset of powerlessness driving current behaviours of students, teachers, and other education actors in many South Asian countries (adapted from Brinkmann, 2019). The dominant mindset of powerlessness and accompanying survival behaviour are constantly reinforced by structures that assume people cannot think for themselves or act to bring change around them, but must rather accept and follow the existing system – as reinforced by existing education systems in South Asia (see Freire, 1970).
India’s Kalikayatna approach: Shifting mindsets through experience and structures

The Kalikayatna approach (‘learning initiative’), which evolved in government schools in rural Karnataka (India) in 2005 with help from the NGO Prajayatna, attempted to shift not only teachers’ practices but also their underlying mindsets, by shifting both teachers’ experiences and the structures in which they operated. In the process, it offered a more organic, teacher-led alternative to the Nalikali activity-based learning model being implemented in the rest of Karnataka’s government schools. It is now being trialled in government schools in selected clusters in the states of Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Telangana (Jha et al, 2016).

The Kalikayatna approach seeks to immerse teachers in more egalitarian relationships by intentionally selecting facilitators based on their warmth, sensitivity, and ability to build a relationship with teachers. Their internal measure of success as facilitators is whether at the end of a school visit a teacher smiles and asks, ‘when are you coming next?’ Modelling a democratic mindset, Kalikayatna’s approach draws out new practices from teachers themselves by insisting that what they advocate is not a specific methodology – they simply expose teachers to basic principles of learning. Thereafter they facilitate monthly one-day ‘Teacher Collectives’, where teachers review progress and themselves brainstorm activities together for the coming month.

But Kalikayatna’s strongest focus is on changing structures, which they view as the most powerful way to change both teachers’ mindsets and practice. They find that when they provide new structures that embody the new mindsets, teachers’ mindsets automatically start changing without them even realizing it. Kalikayatna restructures the existing syllabus by helping teachers map a comprehensive concept list linked to specific learning objectives for each topic – and then teachers themselves choose the appropriate methodology based on the learning objective. Traditional school timetables are restructured by dividing class time into three parts: whole class discussion, small group activities, and individual consolidation time. The approach also restructures traditional classroom divisions by mixing children of classes 1 to 3, and grouping students based on current learning levels rather than age. Perhaps most importantly, Kalikayatna’s approach insists on changing structures of assessment, by obtaining permission from government authorities that the primary schools in which they work will not be subjected to external examinations, but will be entirely free to follow an internal formative assessment approach.

A 2016 evaluation of Kalikayatna’s approach found that Class 3 and 5 students showed greater ability to read with comprehension compared to children in Nalikali schools, even if only slightly, but they also appeared stronger in non-academic skills like confidence, creativity, ability to apply and relate concepts to their surroundings. The evaluation suggests these differences may be due to differences in the teaching process: while Nalikali uses activities alongside learning that remains rote-based, Kalikayatna has been able to better integrate the pedagogy and learning approach, better supporting students’ ability to apply rather than merely recall concepts. This shift in classroom processes has perhaps been enabled by Kalikayatna’s strong focus on empowering teachers: the evaluation found that the notion of greater autonomy for teachers has become a reality. Teachers are encouraged to be more interactive and flexible, with no fixed plan provided for a particular day, but freedom for teachers to choose specific subjects and materials to use in their teaching related to the agreed-upon concept list. Above all, teachers found the monthly teacher collective meetings very useful for providing regular and timely peer support, where teachers could discuss and plan lessons based on what their students are already familiar with. The evaluation found that unlike the Nalikali monthly meetings that functioned more as a way of addressing administrative issues, Kalikayatna intentionally tried to use the monthly collectives to promote among teachers a culture of learning, and that ‘the collective meetings do seem to go a long way in helping teachers become more empowered’ (Jha et al, 2016, p.71).
For example, from personal experience of decades studying and working in South Asia, in the system currently existing in many parts of South Asia students tend to either feel trapped by labels that have been placed on their learning ability, or do what they can to survive in the current system which they see as their only way out. Meanwhile, teachers believe that if a student is not learning they must be incapable of learning, and they have no one else to ask for ideas so they give up on that student. But targeting not just short-term efforts to tweak the system, but also long-term efforts that could actually change the system (which is what achieving UNICEF’s global target of ensuring ‘every child learns’ calls for) is difficult to do, especially in a low-skilled, low-resource context like South Asia. While mindsets and behaviours take a long time to change, one possible point of intervention that could begin changing the system is to provide people in the system with non-coercive opportunities that encourage desired behaviours – that make it easier for those who want to to start thinking and trying to bring change, as shown in Figure 7.

This could involve simple strategies that promote opportunities for people to ‘think and do’. For example, at the school level it could involve setting aside one period a week for students to ‘think and try’ how they can bring positive change around them in their class, school or beyond. For systems, it could involve promoting peer learning opportunities, like online teacher resource banks where teachers can download or upload creative ways to teach or assess common topics; or moderated ‘Whatsapp’ groups for teachers or school leaders to discuss solutions to challenges they face (like Boston Consulting Group in Haryana, India – see Bansal & Bhattacharya, 2017). For UNICEF, this could include offering incentives (financial or non-financial) for people to creatively think and try micro-innovations (like STIR Education in India) or find creative solutions to complex problems like promoting learning at scale (like the global X-prize for education, or Indian Riverside School’s ‘I Can’ movement) Such opportunities can lead to creative behaviour where people find pockets of freedom to ‘think and do’ if they want to, and which is reinforced by empowering opportunities they see around them that there is an alternative to playing by the current system.
Possible strategic leverage points to mainstream a TEAM learning culture

Part of an agile approach to planning for quality improvement involves first thoughtfully analysing why plans implemented thus far have not achieved desired results in improving learning, and what is stopping current behaviours from changing. For example, even measures that focus on strategic areas such as setting goals, training teachers and parents, or data generation, can still fail to achieve desired results if they miss the spirit behind a TEAM approach:

- We set targets, but often these are not achievable given contextual realities
- We train teachers and parents, but fail to empower them
- We collect data, but fail to communicate them in simple ways so they actually get used by key players
- We target the disadvantaged, but fail to address key factors contributing to their marginalisation

Once key barriers to learning are identified, one can reflect to identify strategic leverage points in the system – small changes that can yield maximum impact with minimal effort. These are small changes that have the potential to yield a variety of benefits to multiple factors and players in the system. Accordingly, targeted actions can be made in order to minimise the barriers or work around them to still achieve results. For example, one strategic leverage point for promoting improved learning across grades is to ensure all learners achieve foundational skills, and Box 10 discusses how Nepal employed a TEAM approach to target this strategic leverage point.

Similarly, a few suggestions of possible strategic leverage points that could contribute towards mainstreaming a TEAM learning culture in classrooms, government offices and UNICEF teams are presented in Table 8 (keeping in mind that changing the culture in classrooms involves changing the culture operating at various levels of the system, which is what typically gets reflected in classrooms). Teams at each level would need to reflectively identify what are the strategic leverage points that could yield high impact with minimal effort within their sphere of influence.
**BOX 10 Nepal’s TEAM approach to improving early grades reading**

The national Early Grades Reading (EGR) programme was implemented by the Government of Nepal from 2014-19, along with partners like USAID, UNICEF and others, involving various programmes with the targeted aim of improving foundational reading outcomes in grades 1-3. UNICEF support has been both upstream and downstream in this area. Upstream support included policy and advocacy-based support to the government’s EGR technical working Group and subsequent establishment of an EGR minimum package (i.e. prioritise key targets). Downstream support included the UNICEF-supported “Equity in Education in Disadvantaged Districts” (EEDD) in 2016-2018 in partnership with NGO World Education, to improve early grades reading and math achievement for 24,571 students in 400 schools in four disadvantaged districts (most to the least). The programme placed a strong focus on training teachers, facilitating mobile teacher meetings and Head teacher meetings, and strengthening parental contribution to improving learning (empower key players). The EEDD programme sought to regularly assess progress in learning by conducting annual Early Grade Reading Assessments (EGRA) with a sample of students from project schools as well as a sample of students from control schools (assess and adjust continuously). An endline evaluation of the three-year intervention found that the project more than doubled the proportion of students meeting grade-level targets, with 42.9% of Grade 3 students meeting grade-level targets for reading fluency and comprehension in 2018, compared to 15% in 2016 – reflecting an increase of 186% (World Education, 2018).

**Table 8: Possible strategic leverage points for mainstreaming an agile learning culture in classrooms, systems, and UNICEF teams**

**POSSIBLE STRATEGIC LEVERAGE POINTS TO SUPPORT CHANGE IN SYSTEMS**

- Convene key players at the national or state level to discuss a proposed systems map of factors affecting learning, and what could be strategic leverage points in that context to bring greater alignment towards ensuring change in teaching and learning.
- Conduct classroom-based research to better understand what learning processes are happening in classrooms, and how these can be strengthened.
- Advocate and demonstrate to ensure all primary school children achieve foundational skills, which could have a strategic impact in alleviating the learning crisis at all ages.
- Shift incentive structures to shift behaviour of different players in the system (e.g. help shift assessments to competencies in order to shift behaviour of teachers, students, and others in the system; promote public appreciation of teachers effectively implementing learning-centred pedagogies)
- Identify and showcase outliers successful in showing changes in teaching & learning, to see what lessons could be applied in other places. Leverage and connect these outliers to contribute to momentum to push the system to change by presenting viable alternatives, and to give people hope that an alternative is indeed possible.
- Use UNICEF’s global expertise to help simplify complex ideas, and expose key players to good resources e.g. by creating 2-page summaries of what we mean by quality teaching and learning, educational jargon like ‘diversity’, etc., perhaps with quotes from national documents that align with it, to spark discussions at different levels and help bring alignment in vision across key players.
POSSIBLE STRATEGIC LEVERAGE POINTS TO SUPPORT CHANGE IN CLASSROOMS

• Use available technology to circumvent system weaknesses: Identify or incentivise innovation to provide teachers with good learning websites, apps or software (like Khan Academy, Sampark or Mindspark) that can be used to reach hard-to-reach children, or to counter South Asia’s teacher capacity gaps so that teacher and students can explore and learn together.

• Invite community support to schools, to free teachers to focus on learning: e.g. School Managing Committees or Parent-Teacher Associations can pay a small stipend for an educated individual from the community to help as a ‘school clerk’, offering their time to help with administrative tasks so that teachers have more time for learning-related planning and remedial support.

• Create contextualised videos of ways that even uneducated parents can support their children’s learning in fun ways at home (especially at young ages), and make these available online.

• Create school-level mechanisms to invite well-performing older students or able community members to provide remedial help for children falling behind in achieving foundational skills.

• Involve students in thinking together of actions they can take to help address problems in or outside the school – to empower students and teachers with a problem-solving mindset and a sense of agency that they can contribute to positive change around them.

• Provide incentives for teacher-led peer support: e.g. create an online ‘teacher resource bank’ where teachers can upload good activities or assessment items for common curricular topics; or provide a stipend for teacher-led discussion groups for teachers to discuss together basic learning principles, challenges or solutions applicable to their context.

• Offer incentives to promote action research by interested teachers, to empower them to better understand their students’ learning and ways to strengthen this.

• Create an online ‘Think and Do’ resource bank with some suggested ideas to promote a culture of ‘thinking and doing’ in schools, where people are offered financial or non-financial incentives to either contribute new ideas to the list, or to implement one of the ideas on the list.

POSSIBLE STRATEGIC LEVERAGE POINTS FOR UNICEF TEAMS

• Rethink HR structure from a learning lens: Hire a Specialist for Learning in each education team who has the time and expertise needed to reflectively identify and implement creative solutions to the learning crisis appropriate to that context.

• Address time/workload constraint: Have UNICEF staff track where their time goes, and explore how some tasks could be automated innovative thinking and learning.

• Institute regular ‘Learning Spaces’: a day, afternoon, or even a lunch hour set aside on a periodic basis for CO staff to learn/discuss/brainstorm together on topics of their choice in which they want to grow (RESDA could suggest good resources; COs could spend a month each on learning key principles related to that topic and then planning how to apply these in their work). This would create opportunities for teams to think together on areas that are important but not urgent, and that thus may not typically receive much time for collective thinking.

• Institute ‘Closed Door’ periods (e.g. set hours each day or week where Specialists refuse to attend to emails/ phone/ interruptions so they can focus on learning-focused activities that may require higher levels of energy, focus and creativity.

• Encourage autonomy of Country or Field Offices, allowing them administrative, planning and management flexibility appropriate to the less linear or predictable, more participatory, qualitative and capacity-oriented implications of the learning agenda.
IMPLICATIONS: CREATING LEARNING-CENTRED SYSTEMS
In general, research shows that changing students’ daily learning experiences by changing the nature of teacher-student interactions is the main factor needed for improving learning outcomes (Evans and Popova, 2015; Barber, 2007; Fullan et al, 2018; Murnane and Ganimian, 2014). A current international network of educationists concerned with promoting what it calls ‘deep learning’ finds that ‘schools and systems that are effective focus relentlessly on the teaching-learning process’ (Fullan et al, 2018, p.31). They pay attention to three things: 1. clearly defining learning goals, 2. creating in schools a learning culture to constantly assess and adjust how well their pedagogical practices are working, and 3. providing ongoing opportunities for teachers and leaders to build their capacity to shift from less effective to more effective approaches. Thus an achievable approach to quality learning in South Asia would involve defining foundational skills to be achieved by all learners (e.g. the 3Rs + 4Es), empowering key players to think together on how they can best ensure all children meet these goals within their context, and assessing and supporting those who are not achieving these goals (i.e. a ‘TEAM’ approach).

Across the region, UNICEF COs are asking how they can apply a ‘learning lens’ to their programming, and how they can best support learning improvement in South Asia. This report has argued that shifting South Asian education systems to improve learning requires a combination of short-term interventions aimed at strengthening core learning factors, and long-term measures to mainstream a learning culture across education teams. Both of these together can change children’s daily learning experiences, which is what leads to improved learning. A useful research-based rubric of key principles to guide both short-term and long-term education efforts is captured in the acronym TEAM. A TEAM approach, needed at all levels, involves aligning all actors around key achievable targets, empowering key players (teachers, students, parents), assessing and adjusting continuously, and promoting a democratic culture that gives the most support to the least (in age, performance, or status). This section lays out key recommendations for UNICEF and for education systems in South Asia, drawing from the above findings.
Below are some suggestions to help UNICEF identify how it can strategically support learning improvement in South Asia. This is followed by suggestions of what shifts in education systems could contribute to improvements in learning processes and outcomes.

1. **Align all education actors at national and sub-national levels around learning, to clarify each one’s role in how they can best support universal learning**

UNICEF’s strength in advocacy, given its presence in both international discussions and in local field efforts, places it in a unique position to convene key players at the national level around children’s right to learn, particularly in sector and sub-sector planning. Aligning all actors around learning is not so much a matter of prioritising learning, but a matter of ensuring all components within the system are aligned to lead to improved learning processes and outcomes (including key system components that impact learning such
as departments in charge of training, curriculum, assessment, school management, school supervision – to ensure they send a consistent message). One framework that may be useful in thinking through the role of different ‘right-holders’ and ‘duty-bearers’ is the ‘Human Rights-based Approach to Programming’ (HRBAP), which has been increasingly promoted in the UN system in the past decade (see UNDP, 2006; UNICEF, 2016). UNICEF can help convene discussions between diverse actors (government, DPs, non-government organisations, private sector) so that each one can agree on key minimum priorities, and identify its unique strengths for how it can best contribute to improving universal learning. UNICEF can help shift the attention of both bureaucrats and funders to core factors needed for improvements in learning, which thus far have received relatively less attention from both. This may require developing measurable indicators for core learning factors, since it is easier for bureaucrats and funders to track progress using measurable indicators, which could be done in Local Education Groups where countries are part of the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), as is the case in 6 out of 8 South Asian countries.

2. Focus on understanding and strengthening factors that directly impact what happens in classrooms (learning processes and outcomes)

A key message emerging from Phase 2 is the need for UNICEF to reflect on what factors impact what is happening in the classroom and thus what interventions could contribute to changes to both learning processes and outcomes. Classroom-based research could be a useful tool to facilitate this, as pointed out by Ackers and Hardman (2001) regarding a study of classroom interaction in Kenya that was used to support the government in prioritising allocation of resources to improve education quality, and as a baseline to assess the impact of future interventions. Longitudinal classroom-based studies could be used to assess the impact of different interventions on teachers’ thinking, classroom practice, and student learning. Along with such research, reflections are needed at different levels (including in UNICEF teams) to analyse factors impacting learning that need strengthening. Understanding what factors most impact learning in a given context could help UNICEF think through how best to position itself in the area of improving learning quality – including how it could help identify and promote needed shifts in national bodies as well as teacher development and support systems. UNICEF teams could conduct an 80/20 analysis to identify what are the few specific efforts that yield the greatest impact for improving teaching and learning. This could shed some light on what are the key strategic areas the country or field office should focus on in the coming year(s) to maximise its impact on learning, and what activities it should cut down which do not have as direct an impact on improving learning.

3. Operationalise what a learning lens would look like for UNICEF’s quality programming, designing plans that are strategic yet achievable to impact both core and enabling factors for learning.

Operationalising a learning lens would mean thinking through what it would mean in practice to place learning at the centre of UNICEF’s quality interventions – at both global, regional and country levels. At global and regional levels, placing learning at the centre of UNICEF’s quality programming would require reconceptualising CFS – UNICEF’s chief framework for promoting quality education – to lay out what a learning-centred CFS would look like in practice for all components of the education system. UNICEF’s GES 2019-2030 also lays out the need to shift emphasis from ‘Child-Friendly Schools to learner-centred and child-friendly systems’, to position learning and skills more centrally in UNICEF’s quality programming (UNICEF, 2019, p.39). Such a shift would also require clarifying the assumed Theory of Change for learning underlying UNICEF’s quality programming – what specific inputs and processes would lead to improvements in learning and how. At country level, making plans that are strategic would require identifying strategic leverage points within that context that could produce large impact on the system with minimal effort. Making plans that are achievable would involve thinking through what are the practical constraints, unpredictable circumstances
or unintended consequences that have typically hindered quality programming from achieving desired goals in the past, and designing plans that are flexible enough to respond in case such eventualities occur. All these shifts needed to address the learning crisis as a key programmatic priority would require ensuring the time and skills needed to enable the deeper thinking required for the above shifts (for example, by hiring a quality Learning Specialist in each UNICEF Education Team, and other strategies discussed in Table 8).

4. Help governments operationalise a learning lens, by highlighting evidence of what works (globally and locally) for improving learning processes and outcomes.

UNICEF can use its linkages to both global resources and local field efforts in order to identify and present evidence for specific pedagogical interventions or approaches that have proven effective in improving teaching and learning. For example, UNICEF played a key role in taking teachers to visit the positive outlier of Rishi Valley School in South India, and then bringing resulting small ABL school experiments by governments in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu to the attention of national and even international players, so that this one innovative model is now being adapted in other South Asian countries like Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, and has reached as far as Ethiopia (Fennel, Duraisamy & Shanmugam, 2015). Globally, UNICEF can harness global expertise by inviting experts, partners and consultants with the technical expertise to help steer efforts to improve learning. It can also synthesise and present lessons from global research on what works to improve learning. Locally, it can identify who are the ‘outliers’ on the ground who have been able to demonstrate impact on teaching and learning (in either government or non-government schools), who could be invited as partners in helping the government to scale such principles of success. UNICEF could also help target UNICEF or government resources towards helping teachers implement effective teaching practices: by helping identify good international tools or websites, creating videos of effective teaching practices from within that country, etc.

5. Take long-term steps to shift processes in order to mainstream a learning culture of ‘thinking and doing’, pursuing shifts in both systems and mindsets

A key thing UNICEF can do to contribute to improved learning in South Asian countries is to reflect how it can contribute to mainstreaming a learning culture in South Asia. Political priorities change frequently, but UNICEF’s long-term commitment to promoting every child’s learning gives it the freedom to invest in the kind of long-term measures needed to shift processes (both in the classroom and at different levels of implementation). What is needed are efforts to ‘turn the education flywheel’ – interventions that may not show quick results, but that move things in the right direction to eventually show compounded impact over time. Examples would include promoting non-coercive opportunities for people to ‘think and do’ – opportunities for collaborative innovation in order to bring positive change, including to experiment creative new solutions to South Asia’s learning crisis. Such opportunities that promote a culture of innovation can contribute to chipping away at mindsets of powerlessness that contribute to existing behaviours in the system, promoting the belief that people can indeed change the way things are. Mainstreaming a learning culture in systems would include defining minimum standards that capture the nature of behaviours and relationships desired for classrooms, but mainstreaming these in the systems that influence the classroom. Principles of effective learning would need to be mainstreamed in practical terms in sector planning, in order to scale these into the system. Like Mahatma Gandhi’s famous challenge to ‘be the change you want to see’, part of mainstreaming a TEAM learning culture in UNICEF’s own way of working might be to reflectively choose to focus on only a few achievable targets while saying no to other things; to empower individuals in the team with greater freedom to work creatively based on their strengths; to allow flexible planning that can adjust based on evidence; and to systematically seek to address barriers to learning for the most marginalised.
Below are some recommendations for systems based on what research has found most effective in impacting learning. These also point to core areas in which UNICEF can support systems to contribute to improved learning processes and outcomes.

1. Define minimum learning goals (for both academic and transferable skills, especially at foundational levels), and design assessments to adequately measure them (that assess competencies, not just content)

Given its credibility around issues of children’s rights, UNICEF can play a key role in advocating for placing children’s right to learn at the centre of educational interventions. Governments must ruthlessly
prioritise all children achieving foundational skills in numeracy and literacy by Grade 3, which would go a long way towards alleviating the learning crisis in South Asia. Besides drawing public attention to the learning crisis, UNICEF can also help draw needed expertise for building effective systems of both large-scale and classroom assessments, that can measure both foundational learning and transferable skills. Assessing attainment of foundational literacy and numeracy skills regardless of grade level, rather than tracking attainment of grade-wise objectives, can help teachers and planners know at which level they should target their interventions. Tracking holistic attainment of skills can help shift the performance of students, teachers, and others in the system to better support improvements in both learning processes and outcomes for all children.

2. Prioritise teachers and teaching in efforts to improve learning, through a variety of measures to empower teachers as professionals based on a long-term teacher development plan

Developing teachers as professionals requires a long-term teacher development plan with clear linkages between pre-service teacher education and in-service professional development, along with peer collaboration so teachers can together innovate creative solutions to learning-related challenges they face. Research has found one-off training programmes to be the least effective in changing teachers’ practice, yet this is the form of teacher professional development most used in South Asian countries. UNICEF could help suggest alternative measures to empower
teachers with the needed mastery and mindsets needed to innovate strategies that work in their context to help all children learn. This could be a combination of demonstration of effective practice, in-class coaching, and regular teacher-led review & planning meetings to help teachers think together of learning-centred pedagogies suitable to their context; and well-designed incentives to motivate teachers to implement learning-centred pedagogies (as discussed in Section II.2.2).

3. Target factors that impede teachers’ effectiveness in promoting learning, including motivation levels and other aspects of teachers’ context-specific realities

A realistic approach to planning for learning improvement must take into account the practical realities of the context in which teachers operate, and factors that may be affecting their motivation and factors incentivising them to focus on holistic learning. Measures to build teachers’ professional practice as discussed above must also be accompanied by measures to strengthen teacher management systems. These would include promoting transparent, merit-based recruitment, deployment and promotions, as well as transparent incentives such as fast-track career advancement for teachers who volunteer to be placed in difficult or remote localities. Performance management of teachers would lay out minimum standards clearly communicated, and clear job descriptions for teachers which exhaustively detail their tasks including monitoring and reporting tasks. Moreover there should be annually updated teacher management information systems that cover various types of information about teachers, including pre-service and in-service trainings received, some indicators of classroom results achieved, participation in peer-to-peer meetings at cluster, block or district levels, etc.

4. Implement structured pedagogical interventions that change students’ learning experiences and encourage teaching to students’ levels

Structured pedagogical interventions like ABL in India, CFA in Sri Lanka, Each Child Learns (ECL) in Bangladesh, or Early Grades Learning (EGL) in Nepal, have helped focus actions of teachers and others in the system towards bringing changes in teaching and learning. UNICEF could help highlight models that have worked well and that could potentially be adapted to different contexts. Research found that such pedagogical programmes have been effective in improving learning only where key players have bought into their underlying pedagogical principles. UNICEF could suggest ways to improve these programmes’ effectiveness, by placing greater attention on helping teachers and others in the system experience these learning principles for themselves (applicable to their level/context), so that people in the system fully buy into the approach and can sustain changes in pedagogy even despite changes in leadership or circumstances.

5. Strengthen accountability for learning, by empowering parents to demand and support universal learning, or working with teacher unions to strengthen teacher accountability

Another key area identified by research that can positively impact learning is strengthening the governance of learning – starting with ensuring teachers are accountable for learning, and ultimately schools and systems as well. One way of promoting this is empowering parents with a better understanding of what they have a right to demand. Examples include India’s initiative to display posters with grade-wise learning objectives so parents are aware of what their children should know at each level. Another strategy is to strengthen public information on school quality so that parents are empowered to keep schools
more accountable, such as the ‘Data Must Speak’ initiative in Nepal, or efforts by the NGO ASER to generate public discussion around student learning levels in India and Pakistan. One system that can be built into school functioning is for teachers and head-teachers to negotiate yearly learning targets for each class, and then communicate these to parents as well as upwards in the system, so that these learning targets can be aggregated and monitored at cluster, block, or district levels. Finally, another measure could be to work with teacher unions to explore ways to strengthen teacher accountability for learning, since teacher organisations can play a powerful role in helping teachers improve.

6. Build systemic capacity at all levels to analyse and use data for improving learning

While establishing strong systems of assessment and monitoring are crucial, generation of data is pointless if the data is not actually used for informing practice. A big part of this is determined by how data is presented and shared. UNICEF could work with national institutions to demonstrate how such data could be presented in ways that are easily understandable and usable by practitioners at different levels. Automation of analytic reports using learning data and other monitoring indicators of school quality could be built into systems themselves. One example of this is the Data Visualization App on School Education developed by national institutions in India with UNICEF support, and publicly accessible online (at www.schooleduinfo.in) or through mobile apps. Status and trends of key educational indicators including learning are available in the public domain in a disaggregated manner (by gender, social groups, location and school management) up to block or district levels, and presented in user-friendly ways (see Figure 8).

UNICEF could help governments organise discussions of such learning data so that different levels can reflect together how they could best contribute to addressing learning gaps.
Growing realization that years of efforts have not led to much improvement in learning creates a good opportunity to step back and reflect on what needs to be done differently in developing educational plans, rather than simply doing more of the same. This report recommends a more focused, strategic, realistic and innovative approach to UNICEF’s planning for learning improvement – so that it creates plans that are indeed achievable in the South Asian context. The principles suggested in this report fit well within the 6 programmatic areas proposed in UNICEF’s new Global Education Strategy for 2019-2030 (UNICEF, 2019):

1. **Systems strengthening**: improving the alignment of inputs and actors squarely on addressing equity and the learning crisis (i.e.
Target key priorities – Learning-centred

2. **Community:** promote parental engagement in learning…and supporting social accountability for better service delivery (i.e. Empower key players)

3. **Data & evidence:** generate, disseminate, and support utilisation of data and evidence (i.e. Assess and adjust continuously – Evidence-informed)

4. **Service Delivery:** work across the humanitarian / development nexus to strengthen core service delivery, with a special focus on children in emergency contexts (i.e. Most to the least able)

5. **Innovation:** partnerships with the private sector and governments to promote school and classroom-based innovations, including but not limited to ICT-enabled innovations, that empower and support teachers and encourage new approaches to personalised and adaptive learning (i.e. incentivise a culture of innovation)

6. **Communications:** convene partners and participate in campaigns to influence policies and behaviours of communities, governments and the international community to advance education goals (i.e. shifting mindsets)

Section I.3 outlined key principles of systems thinking that pointed to key shifts needed in the planning approach for improving learning in South Asia, which are useful to keep in mind while developing plans for UNICEF’s own work as well as for supporting governments in developing plans. An overarching message of this report is that there is need for different UNICEF teams to step back and reflect on what learning-related goals they are really trying to achieve, and what needs to be done differently to achieve these goals. Some guiding questions for reflection by UNICEF teams are suggested below:

1. **Focus:** What are the 80/20 minimum essential targets that would have greatest impact on improving learning?
2. **Idealised process:** What are the strategic leverage points that would most help us achieve these goals?
3. **Realistic:** Based on past experience and evidence, what are the constraints and uncertainties that are likely to prevent us from achieving our goals?
4. **Innovative:** How could we utilise creative solutions to circumvent possible barriers in order to still achieve our goals?
5. **Next steps:** How can we ensure enough short-term wins to sustain motivation while simultaneously working towards long-term wins?

As UNICEF is often a coordinating agency for GPE initiatives, UNICEF is well placed to ensure a systems thinking approach is used when designing the Quality Pillar of a country’s Education Sector Plan (ESP), provided that at least one staff is competent in learning and strategic planning approaches (such as Results-Based Management). In this way, UNICEF can ensure better plans are designed by both UNICEF and governments based on a sound TOC for learning (this is something perhaps ROSA can facilitate thinking around), and can gather the support of DPs, donors and NGOs as per their comparative advantage to strengthen different system components needed for ensuring universal learning. UNICEF could help guide a sector-wide process as discussed in the ‘Education Sector Analysis guidelines’ (UNESCO et al, 2014), of looking at assessment of student learning, followed by an analysis of system capacity to deliver improved learning, and looking at issues related to the management of teachers, teaching, and other education resources.

Based on the analysis of the contextual needs and the strengths and limitations of both UNICEF and systems identified in the mapping, the following are some strategic areas where UNICEF could contribute to learning improvement in South Asia:

- **Draw on global expertise to create easy-to-use one-pagers, videos, tools or examples of good practices with demonstrable results, in order to simplify complex ideas related to quality learning,** so that players across the system feel committed and confident about their capacity to improve learning
• **Use local networks to help identify outliers where educational best practices are already happening on the ground,** e.g. by involving experts or consultants, or launching a global or regional call for case studies of programs that have contributed to large improvements in learning, such as is being done by Brookings’ ‘Millions Learning’ project (Robinson, 2014). Highlight such positive deviants to give them legitimacy to the government as potential partners or potential models for upscaling.

• **Become an expert in upscaling,** to be able to advise governments on how to successfully learn from and upscale positive models while taking into account ground realities, constraints, and strategic leverage points. This could involve either replication of good practices (which must include adaptation as contexts vary), or mainstreaming these principles into existing systems (which works best in less complex systems).

• **Take long-term steps to promote a learning culture in South Asia,** where teams at every level (in schools, government systems, and in UNICEF) are empowered to think together and experiment innovative solutions to the learning crisis.

**IMPLICATIONS: CREATING LEARNING-CENTRED SYSTEMS**
This report has argued that improving learning levels in South Asia will require taking a systemic approach to learning, that looks at the system as a whole rather than at individual inputs. This involves starting with understanding what is happening in the classroom in terms of learning processes and outcomes, understanding what components of the system impact on this, and where are the gaps or weaknesses that need to be addressed. What research shows can work to improve students’ learning outcomes is to change their learning processes: to change the nature of teacher-student interactions in the classroom. What can help is to target strategic learning-centred priorities, empower key players that impact learning (especially teachers), continually assess efforts and their impact and adjust accordingly, and to give extra support to the least in ability,
age or status. The findings of this report point to what quality learning could mean for South Asia. An achievable approach to quality learning in South Asia could involve defining foundational learning and skills to be achieved by all learners, empowering key players to think how they can best contribute to ensuring all children meet these goals within their context, and assessing in order to support those who are not achieving these goals.

There are various new opportunities available today that can help South Asian countries implement more high-impact short-term strategies to strengthen core learning factors, than they could have before. Systems are generally better placed to shift their attention to strengthening core and enabling factors for learning. The growing concern over South Asia’s learning crisis has generated greater support from both governments and funders for measures to impact learning. Moreover, there are more tools available to address complex issues of promoting universal learning, such as new technologies and latest lessons from systems thinking and business thinking that can greatly increase impact. All these opportunities can help countries take a more systematic approach to strengthening core and enabling factors needed for learning.

Alongside short-term improvements in learning outcomes, impacting learning processes requires long-term efforts to mainstream a learning culture in the system, which involves shifting both systems and mindsets around learning. It requires providing people at every level with the needed freedom and skills to be able to ‘think and do’ – to think together to come up with creative solutions at their level to guarantee learning for every child. Even strong education systems cannot guarantee a ‘silver bullet’ that will unequivocally lead to improved learning – such as American states’ decision to switch to Common Core learning standards, which after nearly a decade of new textbooks, new teaching methods and new tests, has not yet been unequivocally able to prove clear impact on improved learning (Barnum, 2019). Ultimately the only ‘silver bullet’ is to create a culture of thinking and doing at every level – to create agile learning systems that are driven by clear targets, empower key players with the needed skills and motivation to creatively think of solutions at their level, constantly assess to make sure all children learn, and are willing to learn and adapt if needed. Sustaining motivation to make the hard choices needed to institute a learning culture at every level requires willingness to take a long-term perspective of what is really needed for promoting children’s rights. As one Education Chief put it, funders and bureaucrats want quick results, but quick fixes will not yield sustainable change. Governments or funders may not have the motivation to invest their energies into this long-term perspective, but UNICEF with its commitment to children’s rights is uniquely placed to do so.

This is similar to the conclusion found by the ‘New Pedagogies for Deep Learning’ network (http://npdl.global/), as it grapples with what it means to put the process of learning at the heart of large-scale educational change (Fullan et al, 2018, p.26):

(This) requires focussed collaboration…. Schools and districts that began by focusing on using any small amount of time to collaboratively improve learning saw the benefits and then exploited the structures to create conditions for what needed to be done. The change lesson here is that we need to change the culture of learning … It cannot be done by policies or mandates. Transformation will occur when we engage in the work of facilitating new processes for learning. Once we have agreed on the learning outcomes or competencies… we need to provide rich opportunities to work collaboratively, build new learning relationships and learn from the work. Simply put, we learn more from doing than thinking about doing.”


Berkeley Centre for Teaching & Learning (2019). ‘What is learning?’ Retrieved from https://teaching.berkeley.edu/resources/learn/what-learning


Brinkmann, K. (2019). ‘How to change complex systems’ [Online course]


UNICEF ROSA (2019). ‘Leveraging EdTech to Improve Learning for Disadvantaged Children and Youth’ (draft report), Kathmandu: UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia


**ANNEX 1**

**Meta-studies with recommendations for improving learning in developing countries, organised by TEAM principles**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target Strategic Priorities</th>
<th>Empower Key Players</th>
<th>Assess &amp; Adjust</th>
<th>Most to the Least</th>
<th>Other</th>
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| • Align all actors around a common strategic target                                         | • Empower key players (teachers, parents, students) with needed skills/tools and motivation/incentives to support learning | • Strengthen data creation and use (assessments, monitoring, and accountability for learning) | • Build democratic leaders (and democratic school governance) with priority given to the least (in age, ability, or status) | • Financing  
  • Innovation, Technological advances |
| 1. Dundar et al, 2014 (Student Learning in South Asia, World Bank)                           |  
  • Conducive policy: effective public policy geared to improving school quality and learning outcomes could make a major difference.  
  • South Asia should leverage the contribution of the private sector, comprising not-for-profit and for-profit players, both to expand access to schooling for disadvantaged populations and to improve learning outcomes. |  
  • Early childhood nutrition  
  • Teachers need to be more effective and accountable: clear and transparent standards, Preservice and in-service training, Teacher incentives |  
  • Decentralization reforms hold promise for improving the governance of education systems in the region because of wide spatial disparities within countries.  
  • Accountability for learning: Technical solutions to improving school quality. work only if larger issues of accountability and governance in the education sector are addressed. |  
  • Financing could help as a tool to improve quality: These include changes in the incentive structure for teachers, for schools (through changes in funding formulas), and for districts and states (by linking funding to a combination of need and performance). |
| 2. Asim et al, 2015 (Improving Education Outcomes in South Asia: Findings from Evaluations, World Bank) |  
  • Target teachers or schools and thus the supply-side of the education sector  
  • interventions that provide different actors with resources and  
  • those that incentivise behavioural changes show moderate but statistically significant impacts on student learning. |  |  |  |
### Target Strategic Priorities

3. Robinson & Winthrop, 2016 ( Millions Learning: Scaling up Quality Education in Developing Countries, Brookings)

- **EDUCATION ALLIANCES:** All actors need to work together to achieve a common goal.  
- **LEARNING CHAMPIONS AND LEADERS:** As scaling quality learning is a political and technical exercise, champions within and outside government and the classroom are crucial.  
- **WINDOWS OF OPPORTUNITY:** Effective education approaches are more likely to take root and spread when they align with country priorities.  
- **SUPPORTIVE POLICY ENVIRONMENT:** Government policy must safeguard every child’s right to a quality education.  
- **ELEVATING TEACHERS:** Community expertise should be leveraged to support and unburden teachers.  
- **FLEXIBLE ADAPTATION:** Core elements of effective learning approaches should be designed in response to local demand and should ensure the participation of end-users.  

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<tr>
<td>EDUCATION ALLIANCES: All actors need to work together to achieve a common goal.</td>
<td>LOCAL EDUCATION NEEDS: Interventions should be designed in response to local demand and should ensure the participation of end-users.</td>
<td>COST-EFFECTIVE LEARNING: Cost structures affordable at scale should be incorporated in the design.</td>
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<tr>
<td>LEARNING CHAMPIONS AND LEADERS: As scaling quality learning is a political and technical exercise, champions within and outside government and the classroom are crucial.</td>
<td>FLEXIBLE ADAPTATION: Core elements of effective learning approaches should be identified and replicated across contexts while adapting the rest to local circumstances.</td>
<td>TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCES: Context-appropriate technologies can accelerate education progress.</td>
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<tr>
<td>WINDOWS OF OPPORTUNITY: Effective education approaches are more likely to take root and spread when they align with country priorities.</td>
<td>BETTER DATA: Data on learning and scaling play a central role by motivating informed action at the policy and practice levels.</td>
<td>Financing should be flexible, long-term, and ‘middle-phase’ (to bridge the critical stage between pilot and broad uptake.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>SUPPORTIVE POLICY ENVIRONMENT: Government policy must safeguard every child’s right to a quality education.</td>
<td>A CULTURE OF R&amp;D: Ensuring that more children learn requires a strong ethos of experimentation, collecting learning data, and using it for continuous improvement.</td>
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- **Global shift to access PLUS learning**  
- **Learning Competencies:** all children and youth develop competencies across seven domains of learning.  
- **Common vision & collective action:** stakeholders must take action to ensure the right to learn for all children and youth.  
- **Learning indicators are tracked globally.**  
- **Countries are supported in strengthening their assessment systems and, ultimately, in improving learning levels.**  
- **Measures for globally tracked indicators must be a public good, with tools, documentation and data made freely available. No one should be precluded due to financial constraints.**  
- **Measurement of learning must include an explicit focus on equity, with particular attention to inequalities within countries.**
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| 5. Hewlett Foundation, 2008 – Quality Education in Developing Countries Initiative (QEDC) Grantmaking strategy | • More attention to and accountability for student learning | • Sufficient quality teachers  
• School leadership  
• Learners: Basic nutrition and health  
• Parents: entry & performance supported by family & society  
• Knowledge about effective instructional models that can be scaled  
• putting in place strong incentives for educators to focus their attention on the things that need to happen in the classroom to support student learning. | • Quality assessment at all levels (both civil society & govt assessments)  
• Increasing attention to and accountability for learning. | • Focus on lower grades of primary. |
| 6. World Bank 2018 – Learning to Realise Education’s Promise | • Third, align actors, to make the whole system work for learning. | • Prepared learners, Reduce stunting and promote brain development through early nutrition and stimulation (as in Chile) so children can learn. Support disadvantaged children with grants to keep them in school (as in Cambodia).  
• Skilled, motivated teachers. Attract talented people into teaching (as in Finland). Use repeated, specific teacher training reinforced by mentors (as in some African settings) instead of the ineffective one-off methods that are more common.  
• Inputs and management focused on teaching and learning. Deploy technologies that help teachers teach to the level of the student (as in Delhi, India). Strengthen the capacity and powers of school management (as in Indonesia), including principals. | • First, assess learning, to make it a serious goal.  
• Second, act on evidence, to make schools work for all learners. | • Appropriate curriculum & pedagogy  
• Sufficient materials  
• Sufficient time in class  
• Improving institutional funding and management practices that ensure the proper incentives are in place  
• ensure sufficient resources are available & used effectively. |
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<td>7. The Education Commission 2017 – The Learning Generation Progress Report</td>
<td>• Focus on results: Set standards, track progress, and make information public</td>
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<td>• Inclusion: target efforts and resources to individuals at risk of not learning.</td>
<td>• Innovation: invest in new approaches and adapt to future needs</td>
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<td>• Performance: reform education systems to deliver results</td>
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<td>• Prioritise early years &amp; most disadvantaged – “progressive universalism”</td>
<td>• Harness technology for teaching and learning</td>
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<td>• Ensure leadership and accountability for the Learning Generation</td>
<td>• Strengthen and diversify the education workforce</td>
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<td>• Improve partnerships with non-state actors</td>
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<td>• Finance: increase and improve financing for education</td>
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<td>Increase the international financing of education and improve its effectiveness</td>
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<td>Establish a Multilateral Development Bank</td>
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<td>investment mechanism for education</td>
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<td>8. Rose &amp; Alcott (DFID) 2015 – Equity and learning by 2030</td>
<td>• Empower parents and communities to hold schools and policymakers to account for poor quality education.</td>
<td>• Address disadvantage from early childhood.</td>
<td>• Provide learning resources that support children learning at an appropriate pace.</td>
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<td>9. Evans &amp; Popova (World Bank) 2015: What Really Works to Improve Learning in Developing Countries?</td>
<td>• Pedagogical interventions (including computer-assisted learning) that tailor teaching to student skills;</td>
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<td>• Repeated teacher training interventions, associated with a specific method or task</td>
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<td>• Improving accountability through contracts or performance incentives, at least in certain contexts.</td>
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| 10 | Murnane & Ganimian (NBER), 2014: Improving Education in Developing Countries: Lessons From Rigorous Impact Evaluations | • Empowering parents: providing information about school quality, developmentally appropriate parenting practices, and the economic returns to schooling affects the actions of parents and the achievement of children and adolescents.  
• Students’ daily experiences, more or better resources improve student achievement only if they result in changes in children’s daily experiences at school.  
• Skilled and motivated teachers: well-designed incentives increase teacher effort and student achievement from very low levels, but low-skilled teachers need to reach minimally acceptable levels of instruction. | | | |
| 11 | Krishnaratne, White & Carpenter, 2013 (3IE) | • Empowering teachers: teacher resources  
• Empowering parents: school-based management  
• Empowering learners: school-feeding | | | |
| 12 | Barber, 2007: How the best performing school systems come out on top (McKinsey) | • The experiences of the top school systems suggests that three things matter most:  
• getting the right people to become teachers,  
• developing them into effective instructors | • Ensuring that the system is able to deliver the best possible instruction for every child. | | |
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</table>
| Marope, Griffin & Gallagher, 2018 (IBE) | • ‘It would not be possible to transform learning without first transforming learners into empowered self-benefitting agents.’  
• Increase teacher agency – (E.g. through ICT – involving them in consultation/curriculum design)  
• Classroom support to teachers (e.g. coaching) | | | |
| Glewwe & Muralidharan 2016: Improving Education Outcomes in Developing Countries: Evidence, Knowledge Gaps, and Policy Implications | • Interventions that focus on improved pedagogy (especially supplemental instruction to children lagging behind grade level competencies) are particularly effective,  
• and so are interventions that improve school governance and teacher accountability. | | | |
| McEwan (2015): Improving learning in developing countries: A meta-analysis of randomised experiments | • Empowering teachers and learners: The largest mean effect sizes included treatments with computers or instructional technology (0.15); teacher training (0.12); smaller classes, smaller learning groups within classes, or ability grouping (0.12); contract or volunteer teachers (0.10); student and teacher performance incentives (0.09); and instructional materials (0.08). | | | |