

Can the Middle Tier Drive Foundational Learning at Scale?

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Historically, education reforms around the globe have been driven by the rapid decentralization of decision-making authority from central governments to subnational actors (Burki et al., 1999; Dixon & Eddy-Spicer, 2018; Jimenez & Sawada, 2000; Rivarola & Fuller, 1999; Verger et al., 2016). In low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) specifically, research and practice has focused on decentralization at the school level, emphasizing the autonomy of school-based actors, such as head teachers, teachers, and school management committees, coupled with programs to improve accountability at the school level (Patrinos et al., 2009; Guerrero et al., 2012; Carr-Hill et al., 2016; Evans & Popova, 2016; Glewwe & Muralidharan, 2016; Popova et al., 2016; Hallinger, 2018; Sampat et al., 2020; Flessa et al., 2021). Similarly, reforms to drive foundational learning have also focused on school-based interventions, such as changes in curriculum, instructional time mandated toward foundational literacy, teacher professional development, and teaching at the right-level (Banerjee et al., 2016; Banerji & Chavan, 2016; Rodriguez-Segura & Mbiti, 2022).

The Learning at Scale study was designed to provide evidence on the successful approaches used to improve learning outcomes in eight effective large-scale education programs in LMICs (learningatscale.net). The study addressed three overarching research questions, focused on the instructional practices, instructional supports, and system supports that were essential for the success of these programs. Building on that evidence, this brief is the first in a three part series, drawing on the experience and expertise of thought leaders in relevant concentrations to highlight broader

An integral part of a decentralized education system hierarchy is the “middle tier” comprising subnational actors in charge of education delivery at the regional, provincial, state, district, municipality, city, or circuit and cluster levels. Despite these actors’ proximity to the school, this layer of educational governance remains an understudied area in the literature on education reform (Asim et al., 2023b). We know very little about the potential role of the middle tier in improving teaching and learning and driving foundational learning at scale in LMICs.

What do we know about the middle tier?

The general roles and responsibilities of the middle tier are described in research on district leadership in OECD countries. Their responsibilities range from planning, monitoring, and implementing reforms at the subnational and school levels, to ensuring school-based accountability through data and evidence, to innovating, supporting, and monitoring improvements in teaching and learning in schools through instructional leadership and fostering professional learning communities at the district and school levels (Dixon & Eddy-Spicer, 2018; Gumus et al., 2018; Honig & Coburn, 2008; Mourshed et al., 2010).

While research on the middle tier in LMICs is limited, we have suggestive evidence that subnational actors primarily monitor, supervise, collect, and manage data from schools and “report it up” to higher levels of administration in the education hierarchy (Asim et al., 2023b). Overall, middle managers are described as mediators of school-level policy implementation, who, at best, focus on accountability and management at the school level (Beg et al., 2020; Cilliers et al., 2022) or, at worst, are compliance-oriented cogs in the wheel of educational hierarchy (Aiyar et al., 2015). More recent evidence recognizes that the use of monitoring data and evidence (beyond simple reporting) can be a good practice for the middle tier to adopt to influence teaching and learning practices and learning outcomes at the school level (Childress et al., 2020; Cilliers et al., 2022). However, we still have limited empirical evidence on the factors that enable or constrain their ability to bring about improvements in instruction and foundational learning.

How can the middle tier support foundational learning?

While rigorous academic evidence may be lacking on the ability of middle managers to bring about improvements in foundational literacy and learning outcomes at scale in LMICs, we have theoretical and programmatic evidence on (1) their role in instructional leadership, (2) the importance of building their capacity to drive teaching and learning, and (3) the importance of trust and support within the education system that fosters learning at scale.

First, middle managers can be instructional leaders—that is, they can provide both pedagogical support and professional development to teachers and school leaders. Tournier et al. (2023) describe findings from five case studies (Delhi, Jordan, Rwanda, Shanghai, and Wales) that unpack the ways in which middle managers can bring about changes to teaching and learning. Two of these case studies (Jordan and Rwanda) focus on middle managers' roles in teacher development such that teachers can teach foundational skills more effectively and inclusively (Tournier et al., 2023). In the case of Rwanda, roles for teacher development were institutionalized within the middle tier—specifically, positions were created for “local leaders of learning” to provide pedagogical support to teachers (Page et al., 2023). In Jordan, while the program was not large scale, evidence-based supervision was integrated into the roles of supervisors, who conducted lesson observations, performed evaluations, and coached teachers on how they could strengthen their practices to improve foundational literacy (Churches et al., 2023).

Similarly, the Learning at Scale study describes four programs—Tusome Early Grade Reading Activity in Kenya, Northern Education Initiative Plus in Nigeria, Scaling-Up Early Reading Intervention in India, and Partnership for Education: Learning in Ghana—which included a particular focus on teacher and principal coaching (Stern et al., 2022). Middle-tier actors, such as school inspectors and quality assurance officers in these case studies, provided guidance to teachers on how to teach, and the teachers overwhelmingly reported that it positively influenced their pedagogy. In some cases, these middle-tier actors influenced teachers' attitudes, along with their pedagogy. For example, curriculum support officers in the Tusome

program in Kenya influenced teacher motivation through consistent and meaningful communication and coaching on instruction (Stern et al., 2022).

Second, it is important to emphasize the need to build the capacity of middle-tier actors to serve as effective instructional coaches and lead the professional development of principals and teachers. While creating roles within the bureaucracy at the middle tier for teaching and learning is a critical first step, training the actors hired for the roles is the natural next step. From the Learning to Scale study, we have the example of the Northern Education Initiative Plus, where district officials in Nigeria were specifically trained in instructional support strategies and how to oversee programs in schools (Stern et al., 2022). Childress (2023) reports the nature of training in a Delhi case study, a large-scale program where mentor teachers and teacher development coordinators at the middle tier received specialized training on communication skills, critical thinking, problem solving, and growth mindset, and provided professional growth opportunities. The results showed a shift in culture toward increased collaboration, communication, and professionalism.

Similarly, Crouch (2020) discusses case studies in Puebla (Mexico), Sobral (Brazil), and Kenya, where systems have performed well despite resource-related challenges, to underscore the importance of tracking indicators in real time to provide better and targeted coaching to teachers to influence their pedagogy. These case studies emphasize the importance of training managers to analyze real-time data and tailor their instructional support to teachers to their specific contexts.

Finally, the middle tier must be understood in the larger context of traditionally hierarchical education systems. Pritchett (2015) argues that for hierarchies to function well, accountability is essential such that goals and objectives are aligned for all actors involved in the education ecosystem. Ehren and Baxter (2020) build on the argument by Pritchett (2015) and theorize the importance of trust within a well-oiled accountability-driven hierarchical system. We see evidence of this intersection between accountability and trust in the Pakistan Reading Project, which gained traction once system actors could see how the project aligned with their existing goals and priorities (Stern et al., 2022). Similarly, with Room to Read leading the Scaling-Up

Early Reading Intervention in India, middle-level officials trusted the organization, the program, and the data it generated and, hence, were more involved in the process (Stern et al., 2022). As described by a district education officer in India:



Early on, trust and faith were missing. Many NGOs would come and go as soon as their work was done. This organization cared about doing the work properly. (Stern et al., 2022, p. 188)

Once a trusting relationship is established, actors tend to collaborate well to foster an environment of openness and learning, described as an “empowering culture” by Tournier et al. (2023, p. 16). In foundational learning programs—for example, EQUIP-T—the focus was on the middle tier building communities of learning. Evidence from the program suggests that these communities fostered networks of support. Tournier et al. (2023) also reports that in cases where middle-tier actors had respectful relationships across the administrative hierarchy, they contributed to a collegial environment that kept teachers motivated and engaged. This is confirmed through case studies in Puebla (Mexico), Sobral (Brazil), and Kenya, where systems have performed well despite contextual constraints (Crouch, 2020). Crouch (2020) notes that in these cases, trust and professional accountability resulted in tight feedback loops between teachers and other actors in the system and ensured that teachers felt supported and motivated.

What are the challenges to learning at scale and the way forward?

While the programs discussed above offer promising examples of ways in which the middle tier can play a proactive role in instructional leadership, we still need to rigorously evaluate how effective these ways have been in improving student outcomes. Prior research has shown that there are various factors that enable or constrain the ability of middle-tier actors to do their job and influence outcomes at the school level. For example, resource constraints influence middle managers’ ability to make decisions, whether their role is focused on accountability-based data collection routines, on instructional practices, or on a combination of both (Asim et al. 2023b). These constraints include low budgets and poor utilization of existing financial resources

toward pedagogical improvement (Asim et al., 2023a). These constraints also include a trade-off between accounting-focused monitoring and pedagogical support that drives change at the school level. In other words, middle-tier actors may lack the financial and technical resources that allow them to go beyond the usual classroom monitoring and provide pedagogical support and targeted coaching to schools that influence instruction (Piper et al., 2018). It is important to unpack how these constraints challenge learning at scale and how they can be addressed to improve learning outcomes.

Additionally, it is methodologically difficult to trace how the actions of actors and organizations at the middle tier—given all the variation in resources, level of decentralization, and accountability and trust within the education system—can influence outcomes at the school level. This makes it difficult to ascertain with confidence how the middle tier improves the effectiveness of teaching and learning within the classroom.

Despite these challenges, there is a window of opportunity for scholars, policy makers, and practitioners working in LMICs today. Specifically, there is immense potential to design and implement programs that can facilitate a shift in the role of the middle tier—one that focuses less on managing operations and collecting data and more on becoming effective instructional leaders. There is also potential to innovate with research methodologies to evaluate interventions through which the middle tier can improve foundational learning at scale.



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