

Science of Reading Policies: International Impacts and Impressions

education policy analysis
archives

A peer-reviewed, independent,
open access, multilingual journal



epaa | aape

Arizona State University

Volume 33 Number 73

November 11, 2025

ISSN 1068-2341

“Established beyond any debate...”: Foundational Literacy and the Making of a Policy Priority in India

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Citation: Ghosh, A., & Sarkar, T. (2025). “Established beyond any debate...”: Foundational literacy and the making of a policy priority in India. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 33(73).

<https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.33.8648> This article is part of the special issue *Science of Reading Policies: International Impacts and Impressions*, guest edited by Danielle Dennis and Rachael Gabriel.

Abstract: Amid concerns of a global learning crisis, foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) has become a recent focus area for low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). For instance, in 2021, India launched one of the world’s largest initiatives to achieve universal foundational literacy by 2026–27. Given that the term “foundational literacy” was largely absent from earlier policy discourse in India, little is known about how this idea was made salient to become a current policy priority. Through a corpus-based critical discourse analysis of 90 documents and reports published by government and non-state actors, we identify several discursive strategies used to prioritize FLN as a policy priority in India. These include using science and evidence-based discourse to produce legitimacy for foundational literacy; building consensus by projecting common sense; and producing a temporality of emergency and crisis towards immediate action. We emphasize that the foundational literacy discourse in India is highly political. In particular,

Journal website: <http://epaa.asu.edu/ojs/>

Facebook: /EPAAA

Twitter: @epaa_aape

Manuscript received: 30/9/2024

Revisions received: 7/4/2025

Accepted: 6/6/2025

we argue that such crisis-driven policy narratives and discourses are not so much tied to specific literacy approaches as they are to larger agendas of privatization and political consensus in education.

Keywords: foundational literacy; education policy; discourse analysis; India; education privatization

“Establecido más allá de cualquier debate...”: Alfabetización fundamental y la construcción de una prioridad política en la India

Resumen: En medio de preocupaciones por una crisis global del aprendizaje, la alfabetización y numeración fundamentales (FLN, por sus siglas en inglés) se ha convertido recientemente en un área de enfoque para los países de ingresos bajos y medianos (PIBM). Por ejemplo, en 2021, la India lanzó una de las iniciativas más grandes del mundo para lograr la alfabetización fundamental universal para 2026–2027. Dado que el término “alfabetización fundamental” estaba prácticamente ausente en el discurso político anterior en la India, se sabe poco sobre cómo esta idea llegó a ser una prioridad en la agenda de políticas actuales. A través de un análisis crítico del discurso basado en corpus de 90 documentos e informes publicados por actores gubernamentales y no estatales, identificamos varias estrategias discursivas utilizadas para posicionar la FLN como una prioridad política en la India. Estas incluyen: el uso del discurso científico y basado en evidencia para legitimar la alfabetización fundamental; la construcción de consenso mediante la proyección de un sentido común; y la producción de una temporalidad de emergencia y crisis para motivar una acción inmediata. Enfatizamos que el discurso sobre alfabetización fundamental en la India es altamente político. En particular, argumentamos que estas narrativas y discursos de política impulsados por la crisis no están necesariamente vinculados a enfoques específicos de alfabetización, sino a agendas más amplias de privatización y consenso político en la educación.

Palabras clave: alfabetización fundamental; política educativa; análisis del discurso; India; privatización de la educación

“Estabelecido além de qualquer debate...”: Alfabetização fundamental e a construção de uma prioridade política na Índia

Resumo: Diante das preocupações com uma crise global de aprendizagem, a alfabetização e numeramento fundamentais (FLN) tornou-se uma área de foco recente para países de baixa e média renda (PBMR). Por exemplo, em 2021, a Índia lançou uma das maiores iniciativas do mundo para alcançar a alfabetização fundamental universal até 2026–2027. Considerando que o termo “alfabetização fundamental” esteve amplamente ausente nos discursos políticos anteriores na Índia, pouco se sabe sobre como essa ideia ganhou destaque e se tornou uma prioridade nas políticas atuais. Por meio de uma análise crítica do discurso baseada em corpus, de 90 documentos e relatórios publicados por atores estatais e não estatais, identificamos diversas estratégias discursivas utilizadas para priorizar a FLN como pauta política na Índia. Entre elas estão: o uso de discursos científicos e baseados em evidências para legitimar a alfabetização fundamental; a construção de consenso por meio da projeção de um “senso comum”; e a criação de uma temporalidade de emergência e crise para justificar ação imediata. Enfatizamos que o discurso da alfabetização fundamental na Índia é altamente político. Argumentamos, em particular, que essas narrativas e discursos impulsionados por uma lógica de crise estão menos vinculados a métodos específicos de alfabetização e mais a agendas mais amplas de privatização e construção de consenso político na educação.

Palavras-chave: alfabetização fundamental; política educacional; análise do discurso; Índia; privatização da educação

“Established beyond any debate...”: Foundational Literacy and the Making of a Policy Priority in India

Amid a growing consensus about a global learning crisis, several low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) set ambitious goals to achieve universal foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN). FLN—popularly understood as children’s ability to read simple texts with meaning and carry out basic arithmetic operations—is now a widely used term in research, policy, and practice in such nations (Evans & Hares, 2021). For instance, in its National Education Policy (NEP) in 2020, India acknowledged an ongoing learning crisis in the country and accorded the highest priority to the goal of achieving FLN for all children till Grade 3 (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020).

This urgency around FLN in India drew our attention for three key reasons. First, following the national policy, in 2021, the government launched the NIPUN (National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy) Bharat Mission—one of the largest FLN initiatives in the world—to achieve universal FLN goals by 2026–27 (Ministry of Education, 2021). This rapid prioritization of FLN and its recent intensification as a policy term provides a compelling case to examine how urgency is built around a policy idea. Given that “foundational literacy and numeracy” as a term is a relatively new term in global education (Evans & Hares, 2021), little is known about how it gained salience—what kinds of framing and narrative naturalized it. Second, there has been an increasing non-government and philanthropic involvement in public education in India (Srivastava, 2016). In the last few decades, the state has more explicitly encouraged public-private partnerships, which has led to privatization beyond just the provision of education (Davies & Ghosh, 2025). We found a significant involvement of private actors in the formulation of the NIPUN Mission and, thus, were interested in exploring how FLN as a policy idea is “orchestrated” by such entities (Lubienski et al., 2016).

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, India’s prioritization of FLN in response to claims of a growing learning crisis coincides with an increasing attention to problems of learning, particularly reading, in countries around the world. Irrespective of geographic contexts, there is a marked exacerbation of fears about children’s inability to read. In the United States, for instance, this amplified concern has seen the rapid growth of a discursive movement around the *science of reading*, which pushed for the adoption of phonics-based reading instruction over whole language or balanced literacy approaches. However, as studies have argued, the framing of this crisis and the response to it in the United States entails much more than a simplistic focus on improving children’s reading—including deficit narratives about public education, pathways to promote privatized services in reading instruction, and the subtle weaving in of conservative agendas (Aydarova, 2023, 2024; Gabriel, 2020a). Therefore, we were curious to explore underlying processes in developing support for foundational literacy as a policy solution to the claimed problem of a learning crisis in India.

Addressing these issues, our study examines how state and non-state actors frame foundational literacy as a policy priority in Indian education. We analyzed 90 documents—totaling roughly 1 million words—published by state and non-state actors on the topic of FLN. Combining corpus-based discourse analysis (Baker, 2023) with a critical discourse problematization framework (Van Aswegen et al., 2019), we examine how legitimacy and urgency are constructed about foundational literacy in framing it as a solution to a learning crisis.

We demonstrate the use of particular discursive strategies deployed to make foundational literacy a policy priority: the frequent reference to science and research while making claims; the projection of common sense to develop consensus; and an urgency of a crisis constructed temporally. Based on this, we argue how discourses and narratives circulating in such policy

discussions about literacy are often not so much about literacy or reading; they instead serve political purposes of driving vested agendas and pathways for privatization. Thus, we emphasize the need to critically scrutinize policy framing and discourses in LMICs amid the current crisis paradigm and growing education privatization (Ball & Youdell, 2007) in global education, and to uncover what they make possible and what they obscure.

The Global Learning Crisis and Foundational Learning

Following significant strides in boosting access to education in LMICs, the global education focus shifted towards the quality of education in schools. While the understanding of quality has varied across entities and contexts, in recent times, it has increasingly coalesced around children's basic reading and math skills. This sparked a narrative about a global learning crisis—where millions of children in LMICs are attending school but not learning these *basics*. For instance, the World Bank (2022) currently estimates that almost 70% of children in LMICs cannot read a simple text by the age of 10—a matter of great concern, which they term as “learning poverty”. These discourses, of learning crisis and learning poverty, have spurred a collective mobilization of transnational institutions, donor networks, and philanthropic entities around the idea of FLN (Beeharry, 2021; Evans & Hares, 2021).

Foundational learning is now popularly understood across the global education sector as a gateway or the building block for all other learning, as well as a concept that is “concrete and measurable enough to be both actionable and provide a much-needed metric against which to hold ourselves collectively accountable” (Beeharry, 2021, p. 1). There is an ever-growing consensus that an LMIC can achieve significant learning gains for its children by sharpening its focus on foundational learning (e.g., Crouch, 2020). As a result, several countries drafted policies, often through support from international actors, to prioritize the achievement of foundational learning goals through cost-effective programs and evidence-based interventions.

However, there exist gaps in our understanding between the consideration of FLN as foundational and its popular uptake as a policy priority in LMICs. First, despite being abundantly referenced, the term “foundational learning” has not been clearly defined in scholarship. Even within working papers, reports, or documents published by global institutions and research groups, it has no single, consistent definition (Evans & Hares, 2021; Rossiter et al., 2018), and thus, it remains open to interpretation. Second, we know little about how FLN—a specific term that was rarely used in global education discourse prior to the 2000s—suddenly became such a widely referenced term and an obvious policy goal globally in response to the learning crisis. Our study attempts to illuminate this constructed definition and legitimacy through our analysis of the Indian context.

Our work contributes to existing critical scholarship on the global learning crisis. While some existing critiques of the learning crisis focus on the role of multilateral organizations in undermining local efforts and positioning themselves at centerstage (Silova, 2018), we demonstrate a case where such international crisis narratives play out in a specific national context through a growing entanglement of state and non-state actors (Menon, 2023), signaling growing privatization through education policy (Edwards et al., 2024; Moschetti et al., 2020). The attention to FLN can be viewed as the latest dimension of the *quality turn* in global education (Sayed & Moriarty, 2020), understood mainly through the achievement of measurable learning outcomes.

This study is premised on our observation that, despite including both literacy and numeracy in its larger framing, the discourse on FLN mainly foregrounds problems of reading. For example, a simple search in our corpus reveals literacy-related terms (read, literacy, fluency, etc.) being mentioned almost over double the number of times as numeracy-related terms (math, add, subtract,

numbers, etc.) were mentioned—suggesting the significantly greater prominence accorded to reading and literacy than numeracy in FLN discussions in India. This mimics a global trend in which discourses about learning often entail discussions around only reading-based targets; for instance, the World Bank’s Learning Poverty indicator focuses mainly on the ability of 10-year-olds to read and understand a simple text. In the rest of the paper, while we use the term “FLN” to refer to the policy specifically and “foundational learning” to refer to various components of learning that are considered prerequisites, our focus remains on foundational literacy, as we notice how the learning crisis in India is framed largely around reading.

A key focus in this paper is the construction of problems of learning, literacy, and reading as a crisis. This crisis framing is described by Schweisfurth (2023) as *disaster didacticism*—drawing on the idea of disaster capitalism, wherein enterprises bypass existing regulations by “invoking a need for haste and scale” (p. 4) for their own profit maximization motives. Schweisfurth (2023) offers that international organizations promote such discourses of crisis and fear to either bolster consensus around a “genuinely urgent need” (p. 4) or to maintain their legitimacy as experts. Sriprakash et al. (2020) additionally highlight that the crisis framing of the problem of learning renders it unquestionable and beyond debate. Crucially, they argue that the urgency of the crisis erases and obfuscates the political, systemic, and racialized factors that contribute to the problem of learning in LMICs: the “colonial exploitation, racialised exclusions and ethnic violence, which produce educational ‘crises.’” (p. 12). Our study makes an important contribution to the literature by demonstrating how the problem of learning is framed to be undebatable, how the urgency to solve a crisis is generated, what is included and what is overlooked, and what solutions are made to seem essential.

Conceptual Approach

In analyzing the discursive framing of FLN as a policy idea in India, we draw our conceptual lenses from policy analysis and political science. The formulation of policy is shaped by a specific framework of ideas and standards, or a policy paradigm (Hall, 1993), which entails various policy theories that explain change. However, policy paradigms are influenced by problems that need solving; the first stage of policymaking, therefore, often involves problem definition (Kingdon, 1995). Weiss (1989) defines problem definition as “a package of ideas that includes at least implicitly an account of the causes and consequences of some circumstances that are deemed undesirable, and a theory about how a problem may be alleviated” (p. 97). This act of problem definition within any social policy is a particularly crucial step, as framing a problem or categorizing it a certain way has significant implications for public perceptions of the problem, what are seen as legitimate solutions, who are justified as experts, as well as the social field gets spoken about (Edelman, 1988; Weiss, 1989). Thus, within studies of how policies are framed, examining what the problem to be solved is and how it is described is a critical analytic step.

In relation to this, Edelman (1988) underlines the important role that language plays in policy formulation, given that it provides symbolic meanings to terms, problems, and solutions; but more importantly, it provides policies with their rhetorics, enduring meanings, and narratives. Such narratives and other literary devices, like metaphors, evoke cultural familiarity and accessible associations with policy issues and, thus, influence the relatability and uptake of policies. Additionally, compelling policy discourses often draw on centering research to supersede partisan debates (Henig, 2008), invoking moral panics to push agendas (Barnes et al., 2023) and constructing certain populations in specific ways (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). Social policy discourses rely on emphasizing narratives of crisis, albeit seldom transparently, to build political consensus by merging popular public opinions with common sense (Anderson, 2005; Edelman, 1988). Narratives of crisis

often *stick* as they trigger public anxieties and urgencies about invisible challenges or enemies. But more importantly, naming a social problem as a crisis performs three key roles: it labels an event as different from issues that are routinely confronted; it absolves governments and industrial leaders of any blame and instead shows them as doing their best possible; and it calls for sacrificing certain considerations in favor of the proposed solutions while relaxing resistance to state or private interventions (Edelman, 1988). Even though the current global education agenda as well as FLN policies in LMICs are premised upon the recognition of a learning crisis as the problem to be solved, the discourse of these policy narratives have not yet been analyzed in terms of some of these dimensions—how they frame problems, what kinds of linguistic and discursive strategies are deployed, and what crisis narratives do. Our paper addresses this by analyzing such discursive constructions in the context of India.

Methods

In this study, we examine how state and non-state actors in India frame foundational literacy as a policy priority. We carry out corpus-based discourse analysis (Baker, 2023)—a form of corpus analysis that uses techniques from corpus linguistics to identify and analyze keywords, collocates, and concordances in large corpora. We follow the critical discourse problematization framework developed by Van Aswegen et al. (2019), which brings together critical discourse analysis (CDA) and What is the Problem Represented to be (WPR) to examine the assumptions, perspectives, and justifications that underlie policies.

Corpus Development

Given our focus on the problematizations at the national level, we selected FLN-related documents published by the central government and affiliated bodies (such as the National Council of Educational Research and Training, etc.), including national policy documents, advisory council reports, and implementation guidelines. In following policy and policy actors (Ball, 2016), we identified four non-state actors explicitly acknowledged as contributors within the national FLN Mission guidelines: Central Square Foundation (CSF), Room to Read (RTR) India, Pratham, and Language and Learning Foundation (LLF; Ministry of Education, 2021). CSF is a non-profit organization working on four key areas: FLN, educational technology, early childhood education, and school governance, with a vision to ensure quality education in India and improve children's learning outcomes. Pratham Education Foundation, founded in 1995, is one of the largest educational non-governmental organizations in India—more popularly known around the world for their national level annual learning survey called the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) and their Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) approach, both of which inspired models such as the People's Action for Learning (PAL) network in other LMICs across Asia, Africa, and Latin America. RTR India, founded in 2003, is the India chapter of RTR (headquartered in the United States) and works with state governments in India on literacy and girls' education. LLF, started in 2015, aims to strengthen the foundational skills and language and literacy capacities of children through working on teacher professional development programs. It is important to note that the non-state actors have varying budgets, functions, and influence within the Indian and global education reform movement. We offer that some of the variation in representation in the corpus (Table 1) is due to variations in the scale and focus areas of these organizations.

Given the explicit centrality of these four organizations evident in the NIPUN Mission, we collated publicly available reports, documents, and website pages that focused on FLN, produced by each of these organizations. Lastly, instead of seeing FLN in texts only in the year of its official prioritization in Indian education policy (2020–2021), we wanted to understand the discourse

around it over time. We focused on materials released in the 3 years leading up to the national mission and the 2 years immediately after; we applied this 2018–2023 time bracket to our corpus. This led to the construction of a corpus of 90 documents consisting of 1,089,092 words. Table 1 indicates the number of words, documents, and coverage for each authoring entity.

Table 1

Representation of state and non-state actors in the corpus

Author	Number of words	Number of documents	% coverage in corpus
Central Square Foundation (CSF)	187,141	16	13.02
Government and affiliated actors (Govt)	636,706	45	44.30
Language and Learning Foundation (LLF)	29,458	8	2.05
Pratham	540,047	14	37.57
Room to Read (RTR)	31,303	7	2.18

Corpus-based Discourse Analysis

Based on Baker's (2023) suggestions for software, we uploaded our corpus to the online tool Sketch Engine to conduct an initial analysis. In this process, however, six documents (three from LLF, two from Pratham, and one from the government) were not recognized due to technical issues. After a preliminary analysis of the keywords, concordances, and collocates, we identified three keywords ("foundational", "read", and "literacy") and created concordance tables. A concordance table displays all occurrences of a word in its immediate context (Baker, 2023). This data was cleaned to remove duplicates and irrelevant mentions of the terms, such as in table headings, page headers, and the names of organizations. Table 2 shows the number of concordances obtained from this search and how many were analyzed after cleaning the dataset. We examined all the concordance excerpts to identify initial patterns in the dataset and conducted a discourse analysis of these excerpts using the critical discourse problematization framework (Van Aswegen et al., 2019).

Table 2

Search queries and concordance sizes

Search term	Number of concordances	Concordances after cleaning data
Query:[lc="read" lemma_lc="read"]	3,983	1,527
Query:[lc="literacy" lemma_lc="literacy"]	1,411	743
Query:[lc="foundational" lemma_lc="foundational"]	1,885	1,096
Total		3,366

Analytical Strategy

We used the critical discourse problematization framework (Van Aswegen et al., 2019) to analyze the 3366 excerpts obtained from the concordance search. This approach combines CDA with the WPR approach. We followed Bacchi's (2012) six questions for the WPR approach to examine the discursive strategies employed to make foundational literacy a policy priority in India and position it as the solution to a *problem* of learning. The questions oriented the analysis toward identifying the problem in the policy text, the assumptions underlying the representation of the problem, the effects of this representation of the problem, and the mechanisms and strategies that foreground this representation of the problem.

We focused on problematizations—how policies prescribe certain practices rooted in a particular representation of the problem (Bacchi, 2012). We examined how learning came to be viewed as a problem for the state and non-state actors to address, the practices that enable constructing problems of learning and reading, and the effects of this problem construction. Specifically, examining problematizations dismantled “taken-for-granted fixed essences and show how they have come to be” (Bacchi, 2012, p. 2).

Further, in line with Van Aswegen et al. (2019), we carried out a critical reading of the concordance excerpts to understand policy justifications—that is, reading for examples of *policy warrants*. Cochran-Smith and Fries (2001) identify three kinds of such warrants (evidentiary, accountability, and political) that not only seek legitimacy for policies but also work to diminish the potential for any debates about them. Evidentiary warrants refer to the justifications on the basis of the credibility of the evidence provided. They often include research findings, data, statistics, or scientific language, whose “objective” authority is used to shield the evidence from any debate. While evidentiary warrants foreground the empirical basis for policy problems/solutions, accountability warrants justify them based on the outcomes they produce or are claimed to produce. Lastly, justifications for policies are also made in terms of political warrants—that highlight their contributions towards state and public interests, as well as ideas of citizenship.

While discourse analysis often calls for a certain distance or objectivity of the analyst, this stance is increasingly contested to account for critical reflexivity (Lazar, 2007). We are both upper-caste scholars who received school and undergraduate education in India at institutions that are often exclusionary, particularly along lines of caste. We conducted research through ethnographic methods at similar field sites and examined similar discourses in India. Crucially, we both worked at and with national and international education non-profits in India. Given our prior and current relationships with non-state actors and civil society organizations in India, we offer this critical analysis as a “positioned opening for discussion” (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). In making explicit our theoretical, methodological, and personal relationship with our field of study, we highlight the range of resources we draw on to carry out our analysis (Fairclough, 2013).

Findings

Through this analysis, we identified various discursive strategies used to prioritize FLN as a policy priority in India, which we categorize under three buckets: using science and evidence-based discourse to produce legitimacy for foundational literacy, building consensus by projecting common sense, and producing a temporality of emergency and crisis towards immediate action. Below, we demonstrate how each of these is deployed.

Backing Through Science and Evidence

In line with the WPR approach, we *read backwards* from the corpus of documents on FLN to understand how the problem and solution are both laden with meaning and are constructed as ways to offer seemingly objective solutions (Bacchi, 2012). We engage with how FLN is offered as the policy solution to the problem of the learning crisis or lack of learning in India, largely as concerns about reading and literacy. In this section, we focus on how the policy documents entail problem and solution narratives that are seemingly “neutral, a-political, and value-free, based solely on the empirical and certified facts of the matter” (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2001, p. 6). One such way involves the frequent usage of statistics and data to emphasize the severity of the learning crisis in India. For example, it is claimed that,

This learning crisis starts early, with more than half of these children unable to read simple text or do math by as early as grade 3. (CSF)¹

Data-based facts like these often frame the crisis in terms of learning deficits. The usage of statistics like “around 50% of the children lack foundational learning” (Govt) or “almost 50 million primary grade children in India were not attaining foundational literacy” (CSF) reflects a common pattern in the construction of social crises, where the indisputability of numbers is harnessed to communicate the gravity of a situation (Desrosières, 1998). The mention of numbers and statistics bestows impartiality and authority to the speaker (Desrosières, 1998). Crucially, it conceals the very processes that generate them. In none of the statistical claims about the learning crisis in India are the details of how the data was collected, for what ends, and by whom offered. Instead, the reader is expected to grasp the severity of the situation without questioning how it came to be known this way. The construction of the data is opaque, yet effective as *phantasmagras* (Murphy, 2017), wherein numbers are directed at eliciting affective responses of shock, despair, and urgency without conceding space for debate.

We further find how evidentiary warrants are used to construct the problem/solution of learning by invoking science and research as sources for evidence. Without citing a particular source, the NIPUN Mission guidelines assert that,

Research has shown conclusively that once students fall behind on foundational literacy and numeracy, they tend to maintain flat learning curves for years...
(Govt)

The use of a phrase like “conclusively” aims to establish FLN as a problem/solution in ways that echo a “settled science” of reading (Reinking et al., 2023), where invoking the objectivity and cultural authority of science or research is used to achieve universal legitimacy for policies (Jasanoff, 2011). In such cases, associating a specific claim with terms like “science”, “research”, or “evidence” closes any possibility for debate or deliberation. However, the reference to science or research in these cases is often done without specifications. Neither is the research quoted above explained to the reader, nor is its conclusiveness demonstrated. Instead, merely invoking objectively true research is assumed to be sufficient for rendering claims as established and thus incontestable.

This strategy is also adopted to advocate for a balanced literacy approach as the primary solution to the problem of reading deficits in India. While literacy is framed as not merely “decoding but rather the whole act of reading, including comprehension” (Govt), it is simultaneously emphasized how “research has shown” that developing the same “requires a

¹ Quotes from the corpus are attributed to specific actors (Govt, CSF, LLF, Pratham, RTR).

comprehensive and systematic approach known as the Balanced Literacy Approach” (Govt). Relatedly, “research on successful literacy programs across countries and languages” is drawn upon to claim how a balanced literacy approach focusing simultaneously on phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension “has been tried and tested in India” (CSF). Similarly, CSF underlines that,

Scholars recommend that children should be taught meaning making even while learning to read aksharas² and words in early grades through a balanced literacy approach. (CSF)

Across these instances, we note how advocacy for balanced literacy is conducted through framing it as systematic, research-based, and scholar-recommended. Thus, its justification is reasoned through evidentiary warrants. In the case of foundational literacy in India, we notice its conflation with the balanced literacy approach; these terms are used interchangeably several times in our corpus. Based on the frequent interchangeable usage of the two terms in our corpus, we surmise that the policy discourse attempts to conflate foundational literacy with balanced literacy. This is particularly striking, as the desired literacy skills (foundational literacy) are equated with the advocated approach (balanced literacy) to develop them—thus legitimizing the approach, through frequent interchangeable association, as the only acceptable method to build the skills. In other words, *doing foundational literacy* becomes *doing balanced literacy*, and vice versa.

Further, we find the discourse around reading and literacy to be saturated with scientific terms specific to the brain and cognition. For instance, we notice that the NIPUN Mission guidelines claim that,

if the neural circuits used in reading are functional, even poor and malnourished children should learn to decode and read fluently. (Govt)

Here, the first phrase of the sentence invokes a brain-related term like “neural circuits” to convince a non-expert reader about how reading happens cognitively. Such language implies that reading is to be understood as a purely technoscientific process that happens inside the brain, which then works towards the depoliticization and decontextualization of “poor and malnourished children”. Taken together, fluent reading is meant to be seen as completely unrelated to socio-political conditions like poverty or malnourishment—as something that can happen successfully as long as the scientific process in brains can be ensured. The problem of reading, then, is detached from children’s ecologies and shown to be strictly a cognitive one. Furthermore, the use of “even” prior to “poor and malnourished children” underlines the *othering* of such populations as different from the norm, but ones who can be fixed as long as the scientific process happens as it is supposed to be.

Projecting Policy Problems and Solutions as Common Sense

In this section, we examine the ways in which state and non-state actors invoke common sense to describe the problem and solution to the learning crisis and learning deficits. Policy consensus is essential for mobilizing diverse groups of stakeholders and getting them to support a common action or agenda (Edelman, 1988; Kingdon, 1995). This process often entails posing policy solutions in several ways that intuitively make them seem worthy of support across ideologies and political entities.

² An akshara is a graphemic unit in several Indian languages.

One way in which this is done in our corpus is by highlighting the ways in which foundational learning is tied to highly desirable outcomes, influencing public opinions towards it on morally right grounds. Using such accountability warrants (Van Aswegen et al., 2019), the documents justify FLN in a way that makes it the *right* thing to do. The NIPUN Mission guidelines claim that,

The importance of foundational literacy has been established beyond any debate to be an important contributor to future success in academics, decreased failure rate, better overall scholastic achievements, and generally greater adult life success. (Govt)

Foundational literacy is framed as a vital prerequisite for a variety of outcomes, from immediate academic success in schools to long-term individual benefits. Given that most of these outcomes might be universally desirable, foundational literacy is framed as an obvious and necessary first step towards achieving them. Similarly, the reader is told that “a life with dignity, health, and opportunities depends on the ability to read, do simple math” (Govt), without any evidence for the same or any descriptive theory of change that explains how focusing on FLN will incrementally lead to such outcomes. Yet, as evident above, the reader is expected to believe these links as they are claimed to have been “established beyond any debate”. While evidentiary warrants invoked research or science to justify claims about FLN in our documents, accountability warrants involved claims made on the basis of common sense. For instance, the Indian Minister of Education mentions that the goal of the NIPUN Mission is

to help and empower them [students] in achieving foundational skills, which indeed forms the basis of all future learning. (Govt)

Such statements make certain connections obvious and natural, narrowing the scope for critical introspection (Anderson, 2005). We can understand these claims as an exercise of ideological power (Fairclough, 2013)—that is, the power to project certain ideas and practices as self-evident. The usage of “indeed” above not only appeals to the reader by constructing common sense but also erases the need to provide evidence to demonstrate how foundational skills are the basis for future learning.

A second way of projecting common sense is by appealing to perspectives on the larger purposes of education as well as by addressing issues of social justice and human rights. Through these political warrants, authors of the documents in our corpus enhance the imperative for following through on such policies to ensure broader collective goods. In our documents, we find that foundational learning is discursively tied to national interests to boost its status as a policy priority. For example, the Prime Minister’s Economic Advisory Council asserts that

Accomplishing universal Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) is a significant element in improving the education system of India. (Govt)

Additionally, by using more rights- and justice-centered keywords in talking about foundational learning, such political warrants aim to rhetorically signify foundational literacy as a stepping stone for equity and development. For instance, in our documents, the opportunity to attain foundational literacy is described as a component of the “basic rights of every citizen” and essential for promoting “an equitable and inclusive education in India” (Govt). In such descriptions, rights, equity, and inclusion are linked with foundational literacy without explaining how it would contribute to them, while also bypassing any engagement with social issues like casteism and ableism that have historically plagued the Indian education system.

A third way in which FLN advocates project common sense is through the discursive construction of a shared community. Public facts are often made by using the generic subject term “we” to denote who bears the knowledge of the claim. For instance, a teacher capacity building module for FLN claims that,

We all are aware of the significance of Foundational literacy and numeracy in the overall physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development of the child.
(Govt)

Using “we” is a way to draw the reader into a shared community that recognizes the claim as a fact, without their approval, without mentioning who else is included in the “we”, or without explaining how “we” came to be aware of this knowledge (Fairclough, 2013). Invoking common sense and public knowledge this way serves to depoliticize claims and obscures agendas to present policy efforts in education as non-partisan (Anderson, 2005). That makes it possible for policy ideas to get unanimous support from across stakeholders due to a sense of universal truth that is afforded by such discourses.

Lastly, FLN is justified through common sense by constructing it as a nominalization (Fairclough, 2013), a catch-all term. The term “foundational literacy” in our corpus is a *floating signifier*—a term full of potent meanings that reflect relevance for different stakeholders, and yet lacking a clear, consistent definition (Laclau, 2005; Lévi-Strauss, 1987). A floating signifier is a discursive element that is not tethered to any particular meaning and yet can have different meanings when used in relation to different contexts (Lévi-Strauss, 1987). Laclau (2005) highlights that, due to the impossibility of defining the term, floating signifiers are often used to legitimize agendas or seek buy-ins for viewpoints as they are redefined in relation to the audience. For instance, the NEP defines foundational literacy as “the ability to read and comprehend basic text” (Govt); a simplistic definition that overlaps and yet differs with other definitions of the term in our corpus, such as “Foundational Literacy means oral language development, decoding (sounds and symbol relationships), reading fluency, reading comprehension and writing” (Govt) and “the ability to identify letters (a, d, h), words (at, cat, ball); read them fluently with meaning” (CSF). The vagueness of what “basic text” is or the inconsistency around the inclusion of writing as a foundational skill in literacy demonstrate the open-to-interpretation nature of the term “foundational literacy”. Despite this, across the definitions, foundational literacy is certainly not a meaningless term or an empty signifier; instead, it means *everything*, and yet *nothing* concretely specific. This vagueness in policy framing makes policy buzzwords open to interpretation, and thus, stakeholders are likely to have different visions of what such policies look like than what is intended. Thus, drawing on Laclau (2005), we interpret the floating meanings of foundational literacy in these documents as not necessarily directed towards legitimizing a certain definition of it, but to achieve unanimous support for it as a necessary component of education. In other words, the reader can infer any meaning of foundational literacy as they like, if they concur that it is a vital prerequisite for everything else.

Learning Deficits as an Urgent Contagion

In examining the documents produced by the different policy advocates involved in FLN in India, we highlight how the temporalities of education reform are crucial to the construction of emergency as a discursive strategy. There is an underlying implication that the problem, described in different iterations as a problem of learning and reading, is an emergency that requires urgent action.

We focus on how an emergency or crisis operates through a distinct relationship with time and, in particular, with the future. Crises or emergencies are in the present, past, and “unless

interrupted, will be the future” (Anderson, 2017, p. 464). That is, emergencies constitute a call to recognize the presence of factors that will lead to undesirable futures and the need for action to prevent certain outcomes or deliver more desirable futures. Anderson (2017) describes emergency as a “technique” (p. 463) and “device” (p. 463) that has become a “taken-for-granted way of apprehending and governing events and situations” (p. 463). In particular, he offers four temporalities that characterize the construction of emergencies—exceptionality, urgency, interval, and hope.

Exceptionality constitutes two aspects—one, to call for or require exceptional measures, and two, to mobilize action such that the event becomes an exception. The NEP of 2020 prioritizes efforts towards “averting the learning crisis” (Govt), such that

attaining foundational literacy and numeracy for all children will thus become an urgent national mission, with immediate measures to be taken on many fronts and with clear goals that will be attained in the short term. (Govt)

Here, exceptional measures constitute the “urgent national mission” that has to be carried out in ways that budgets, resources, and attention are directed towards the “clear goals” of universal FLN by 2026–27. The usage of the terms “mission” and “mission mode” across documents invokes both a proselytizing endeavor and a form of military action, implying a need to spread the urgency around this policy prerogative. The grammar of mission and urgency finds its way across organizations as intertextual references. For instance, in an organizational report, a senior representative at CSF writes that:

NIPUN, above all, still helps all states recognise the problem: what is learning poverty and why is it important? Half our children at age 10 cannot read in Hindi, English or regional languages. I think NIPUN sends the message that we need to tackle this not-so-trivial problem in a mission-oriented manner. (CSF)

NIPUN references the state’s implementation framework for FLN, whose guidelines were developed in consultation with CSF and the other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) included in our corpus. Here, NIPUN, a policy, becomes an actor that “helps” and “sends the message” to perform urgent actions in a “mission-oriented manner.” The underlying assumption is that such exceptional measures will mobilize action to ensure that “nearly five crore [50 million] children...dropping out of the learning system” (CSF) becomes an exceptional event, an undesirable future that must not occur.

Associated with this is the construction of *urgency*—the production of a looming future that constricts time available for action such that “delay is a risk” (Anderson, 2017, p. 470). Time is constricted—both at the level of the individual child and at the level of the nation. On a website, CSF states that,

Class 3 is considered the inflection point by which children are expected to ‘learn to read’ so that they can ‘read to learn’ after that... The future of our children and India’s ambition of demographic dividend depend on whether child reading and maths skills by Class 3.

Grade 3 serves as an inflection point “where children who have not made it, get left behind” (Govt). The focus on Grade 3 as the ultimate moment beyond which little can be salvaged raises the stakes of early-grade reading and creates urgency; this converges policy action towards a specific idea—foundational literacy. This echoes global trends,

wherein in the United States, a near-identical discourse has been used to push for Grade 3 retention policies in several states (Schwartz, 2022).

The delay in resolving the crisis is described as having dire consequences for the “future of our children” and “India’s ambition”. Demographic dividend refers to India’s ability to maximize the potential of its young population to achieve human capital and development goals. Achieving reading-related outcomes by Grade 3, viewing certain years of a child’s life as “critical” as a “child’s lost years can never come back” (Govt), presents a compressed, constricted time for action. The documents construct a sense of urgency by describing the ways in which delays in action are risky; the FLN mission is the “need of the hour” to be achieved by 2026–27 (CSF). At the same time, the panic associated with the emergency requires that action is possible, constricting the interval within which it must occur at the “right time and at the appropriate level” (Pratham).

Further, the *interval* refers to a break in time wherein action can alleviate or mitigate the situation, a break between the past and the future. Contrary to conventional crisis narratives where the current state of declining quality is framed in reference to a better past, the blame for the learning crisis in India is attributed to the past: “past attempts have shown that a holistic approach is crucial and there are no silver bullets to improving foundational learning outcomes” (CSF). This discursive strategy justifies the need for drastic change in the current moment by referring to the shortcomings of the past. Yet, in these discourses, besides the use of specific temporal terms like “earlier”, the usage of passive voice also contributes towards distancing current policy actors from prior practices. For instance, the limitations of literacy approaches “which were used” (Govt) are spoken about without specifying who used them or recommended their use.

The construction of emergencies requires *hope* to activate action—in promoting a belief that the situation can be transformed, and that it is not too late. The desirable, hopeful future presented in the policy documents offers that the problem of learning and reading is rightly addressed through a concerted focus towards foundational literacy. The causal outcomes purportedly associated with the achievement of foundational literacy are claims about desirable futures. The documents offer how mobilizing action, efforts, and resources towards FLN will allow the children of the country to experience and for the nation itself to achieve brighter, hopeful futures. In contrast, the looming, fearful future, the one to be avoided through urgent action, is one where “the children will not obtain the human capital they need to enhance their careers, become engaged citizens, and contribute to the economy after they leave school” (Govt).

In this way, foundational literacy appears to be a panacea for the learning crisis; foundational learning is a remedy to a particular *disease* or problem. Here, drawing on Bletsas & Beasley (2012), we can understand what the problem is represented or constructed to be: learning deficits as a form of contagion that requires containment. The learning crisis is then an epidemic of alarming proportions; the disease of poor learning requires prevention and treatment; the consequences are described as dire and irreversible. We can understand this as a kind of *epidemic logic*—the construction of a problem of deficit that requires “containment and control” (Pillow, 2015, p. 60). The documents offer that “preventing the accumulation of learning deficits” requires “quick corrective action” and that early interventions will ensure that the “need for later remedial action is eliminated” (Pratham).

Further, the documents include a language of disease and remedy: foundational skills are then the cure for the problem of learning deficits, where children are “highly exposed to low learning outcomes in literacy and numeracy due to their family’s economic and social conditions” (Govt). This deficit is understood through a lack in the child and the lack in teachers: “Because of their socioeconomic conditions, 25% primary school children in India face a moderate to severe learning disadvantage” (Govt). The description of the problem of learning, as something that

children are “exposed to” or “face moderate to severe” disadvantages of, underlines a medicalization within this crisis discourse. Additionally, the use of the language of containment highlights the ableist and exclusionary tendencies embedded in the construction of the learning crisis (Sarkar, 2025). Children with disabilities, in particular, are viewed as obstacles to achieving the kinds of futures where all children learn how to read and write by Grade 3. Identifying and containing children with disabilities is then an important prerogative in the policy documents. As stated in the NIPUN Bharat guidelines,

recognising and addressing developmental delay and disability in the Foundational Stage is very important because these years are vital for the pathways on which future learning is based. (Govt)

The focus on remedial action, correction, and segregation within the documents is in line with containment approaches in education that call for classification, exclusion, individualization, assessment against predetermined outcomes, and control.

Discussion and Conclusion

The impetus for this study was the recent proliferation of discourses about the learning crisis in LMICs and, subsequently, the mobilization around foundational literacy as a key policy priority in India through a growing conglomeration of state and non-state actors. Through a combination of corpus-based discourse analysis and critical discourse problematization framework (Van Aswegen et al., 2019), we identified three overall discursive strategies adopted by state and non-state actors in India to establish FLN as a policy priority in India: (1) the frequent reference to science and evidence, (2) the construction of common sense for a shared community, and (3) the creation of urgency and contagion. It is important to understand this emergent policy paradigm as a construction located within certain societal conditions in India and globally, examining which allows us to identify the logics and assumptions underpinning FLN. We focus on how foundational literacy gained “traction in specific places at specific times, considering their possible effects and how different circumstances may (have) produce(d) alternative understandings” (Exley, 2025, p. 2).

Crucially, the 2020 NEP in India, which established FLN as the highest priority, has been scrutinized for the ways in which it reshapes how equity and inclusion are imagined in the Indian policy context (Batra, 2020). The NEP is critiqued for reinforcing caste hierarchies (Singh, 2023), promoting monolingualism and establishing the dominance of elite and exclusionary knowledge systems (Pandey & Ozarkar, 2025), encouraging education privatization (Bhatty, 2020), and furthering the exclusion of disabled children (Sarkar & Cravens, 2022). For instance, Singh (2023) notes that the terms “caste” and relatedly “affirmative action” and “reservations” are not mentioned in the NEP as a “deliberate attempt” to present the Indian education system as “casteless” (p. 66). In the context of reading, the focus on home language and mother tongue obscures what Pandey and Ozarkar (2025) describe as “multilingualism from a monolingual perspective” (p. 76), arguing that the policy represents clashes amongst different versions of what it means to be Indian amongst the elite.

In critically analyzing the discourse around foundational literacy in Indian policy discussions, our goal is not to discount the importance of literacy skills for children or to debate what approach to literacy is best suited for getting children in Indian schools to read. Instead, we highlight a larger argument—that the discursive construction of foundational literacy is not quite just about promoting balanced literacy or any such specific technical approach to teach reading. We emphasize that the foundational literacy discourse in India is highly political. What is implicitly advocated for when a specific version of literacy or approach to reading gains primacy? What does that enable or

make possible? A starting point for these questions is perhaps provided by Edelman (1988), who argues that invoking crisis narratives in policies absolves authorities and dominant systems of any blame; but more importantly, it demands unquestioned commitments towards proposed solutions, while relaxing resistance to state and non-state interventions. That is, the creation of urgency, panic, and the use of scientific language to create a consensus around a singular approach to examining a problem/solution “reveals a stance that is decidedly polemical—and political” (Reinking et al., 2023, p. 121).

In the context of India, we emphasize that the role of non-state actors in making foundational literacy a policy priority is an example of privatization through education policy (Edwards et al., 2024; Moschetti et al., 2020). In particular, the discursive strategies we identify in this study are explained by strategies used by non-state actors across global contexts to influence policy: the creation of coalitions of aligned actors, the dissemination of research that reproduce the agenda of this network, and the development of pilot programs that serve as models for policymaking (Moschetti et al., 2020). For the latter, for instance, in India, much of the recent learning crisis narrative has been similarly generated by non-state actors (e.g., Pratham through its ASER surveys since 2005), who now, for instance, are not only key stakeholders in framing FLN policy but also have their programs incorporated in public schooling in several Indian states.

In this way, we emphasize that foundational literacy is constructed as a policy priority through the heightened entanglement of state and non-state actors. In other words, the framing of a learning crisis in a certain way and the proposal of foundational literacy as a priority in response to it paves the way for more private intervention in a seemingly *failing* public education system. As Menon (2023) notes, there is a changing relationship between the state and NGOs in India, with several states entering into partnerships with large NGOs “under pressure to achieve the NIPUN Bharat” goals (p. 179). What then remains unclear is “how much is left to the judgement of partner organisations” (p. 179), with NGOs making crucial decisions about curriculum, pedagogy, and teacher education within these collaborative relationships. These developments coincide with a larger political and economic shift in India that is increasingly seeing higher levels of public services being privatized. There has been a growing rate of relaxed regulation of private actors in education (Davies & Ghosh, 2025), as reflected in the latest NEP’s call for the “rejuvenation, active promotion, and support for private philanthropic activity in the education sector” (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020).

Our intention is not to admonish the private actors whose discursive strategies in collaboration with the state are the subject of our analysis in this paper. In fact, we recognize that some of them have raised important questions and challenges that reflect a sense of introspection and recalibration about the way the NIPUN Mission has been implemented (see Jhingran, 2023). What we seek to problematize is the playbook of discursive strategies deployed to legitimize any intervention as a policy priority for the state and, therefore, position certain actors as experts. Further, the state is not a passive actor within this discursive moment in Indian education. Much like Ferguson’s (1994) analysis of an anti-politics machine in Lesotho, we see this moment of a learning crisis as a way for the state to further strengthen its grasp over systems, while simultaneously depoliticizing education in collaboration with private actors. Shankar (2023), while describing transnational elite *savarna*³-led NGOs in India as “brown saviors”, argues that interventions or policy solutions, when constructed as “apolitical, universal solutions” allow NGOs to make “moral claims” without getting into the “messy politics of position, history, or capital” (p. 6). Crucially, given the tenuous position of NGOs vis-à-vis the state in India and the recent cancellation of licenses to

³ A term referred to those belonging to the upper *varnas* in the caste system; denotes levels of privilege in the caste hierarchy.

receive foreign funding for many of them, NGOs perhaps need to appear politically neutral or to align with the state as a form of survival (Sarkar & Cravens, 2022).

In conclusion, given that the specific term “foundational literacy and numeracy” encapsulates much of what has long been the Indian state’s focus in terms of basic reading and mathematics, we argue that its novel usage in education policy serves more than one function. The use of the term “foundational literacy” permeates public debates in ways that emphasize the urgency of reform (Moschetti et al., 2020). Using a new term as a policy focus acts to usher in a performative paradigm shift in education and emphasizes a severance from the *flawed paradigms* of the past—even though there might be little change substantively. By repeatedly demonstrating prior efforts of public schooling as inferior, the creation of a paradigm calls for new kinds of experts and actors who can *do things* differently.

Further, while our findings reveal a specific case of policy discourse in the context of India, we see them as part of a larger global phenomenon, in which similar discursive strategies are deployed to achieve policy legitimacy for specific literacy approaches and obscure private interests. For instance, the discourse around “science of reading” emerged as an evidence-based and scientific solution to the challenge of reading in the United States (Seidenberg, 2017). Aydarova (2023) shows in her analysis of science of reading policy debates that besides the usage of brain- and cognition-related scientific discourses to explain how reading happens, science of reading advocates also often claim legitimacy by using the seemingly objective and impartial perception of science, discounting other approaches as unscientific and thus not appropriate (Aydarova, 2023; Gabriel, 2020b). This resonates significantly with what we find as a key discursive strategy used to legitimize foundational literacy as a policy priority in India. Additionally, in our analysis, the frequent interchangeable use of foundational literacy and balanced literacy positions the latter as the only way to achieve the former; anyone who debates this policy paradigm may then come across as unscientific and ideologically driven. Therefore, we infer that these discursive strategies work towards developing a hegemony over what children’s literacy is understood as, as well as reifying only one *correct* way of teaching the same. We advocate for future research that examines these connections by following flows of policy, networks, ideas, and funding (Ball, 2016).

Another avenue for future research is to examine how the use of similar discursive strategies across contexts attempts to obscure political interests to support specific approaches to literacy. In India, the discursive strategies legitimizing foundational literacy advocate for a balanced approach to literacy. On the other hand, scholars identify the use of similar strategies in the United States to advocate for phonics-based instruction. This comparison can offer the ways in which the narrative about a crisis of children’s reading ability and the urgent necessity for science of reading reforms is largely driven by private organizations and non-government think tanks. In the United States, such actors often emphasize the failure of public schooling to get children to read, and in endorsing “science of reading” as the solution, weave in their products, services, and interests as related to the same science (Aydarova, 2024). This positions them as “experts” of the science of reading and thus often provides them a seat at policymaking tables or access to public schooling. In this way, the usage of discursive strategies about a science of reading in policy debates seems to enable think tanks, intermediary organizations, and philanthropies to pave the way for increased private sector intervention and standardization in education (Aydarova, 2024).

Future research should scrutinize how private actors work closely with the state beyond just policy formulation, but in policy implementation as well. At the same time, while the policy formulation for foundational literacy demonstrates a narrative of a break from existing systems and practices, studies must examine how much of this discursive shift translates into a shift in practices in the education system.

Overall, our paper demonstrates the discursive strategies employed by state and non-state actors as efforts to obscure the politics of reading and learning and the political motives of the actors benefiting from legitimizing a particular ideal of learning and childhood. The “science” of reading or literacy then is the politics of reading: hiding behind promised futures, crying calls of an emergency wherein the future of children and the nation state is at stake, and in rhetorics rooted in evidence-based decision making.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the reviewers and editors for their incredible guidance and support. We also want to express our gratitude to Lesley Bartlett for her thoughtful comments on a previous draft of this article and to Amogh Basavaraj, Aanchal Gidra, and Jonathan Marino for their engagement with the same.

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Science of Reading Policies: International Impacts and Impressions

education policy analysis archives

Volume 33 Number 73

November 11, 2025

ISSN 1068-2341



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