



NSI 09: Foundational Learning: Current Debates and Praxes > Background notes

We are midway to reaching the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals from when they were agreed by multilateral organisations, national governments and civil society organisations in 2015. The Education Goal, SDG4, is seen to be significant in that it generated a relatively high degree of involvement by civil society and national governments. It reconciled competing emphases on equity and learning and satisfied, often opposing, notions of what the commitment to quality education should entail. The ‘quality discussions’ reflected the essential tensions between civil society organisations, who understood quality in terms of developing the full human personality and the need to safeguard all life on the planet, and most multilateral organisations and larger donor governments, who argued, ostensibly on grounds of practicality, that a narrower agenda targeting literacy and numeracy was more desirable. SDG4 retains the broad commitment to quality in the overall goal: “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.” Among its ten targets, however, SDG4 includes clear indicators for achieving minimum proficiency levels in reading and mathematics (Indicator 4.1.1) and to mainstreaming global citizenship education and education for sustainable development in national education policies, curricula, teacher education and student assessment (Indicator 4.7.1), acknowledging the broader conception of quality in education.

Other general questions that may motivate your contribution include: What is the extent of the pivot to Foundational Numeracy and Literacy (FLN): what are opportunity costs for the other commitments under SDG4? What does the emphasis on foundational learning at this juncture reveal about the power relations in global education governance, the value of consultations or the meaning of global consensus? Can FLN only be achieved at the expense of the other SDG goals and to what extent are the SDG4 goals interdependent? Foundational skills are indispensable to quality education, how are they differently understood: should they involve social, emotional and, perhaps, ecological learning? Should foundational learning for adults be more actively part of this commitment? What insights do pedagogical practice and teachers and students from around the world offer about foundational learning? What is quality education, how broad is it and how wide are its foundations? Why are crises narratives so readily employed when setting agendas for education; and are notions of a learning crisis, learning poverty, or a global education crisis in any way helpful? How best can societies organise to achieve education goals? What does history reveal about the power of social movements and inspired national leadership for achieving educational goals? What are the ways forward for the education sector in a period of threatening ecological collapse, what priorities are forced, what do its futures promise?

Fuller notes on the five themes, or possible sections are below:

1. Excavating narratives on foundational learning

Foundational learning is an evolving concept that responds to changing understandings of cognitive development and pedagogy, ideological leanings, the demands of the economy or struggles for national liberation. How is the current discussion about FLN and learning poverty, different from the discussion about the learning crises a decade ago, or the basic education movement, the national literacy campaigns and the popular education movements in the twentieth century? How do ideas like the following inform our understandings of what is foundational and what is constructed next: OECD’s emphasis on core foundations, notions of multiliteracies, STEM subjects (or STEAM if we include the arts), and UNESCO’s recognition that “literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society”? Contributions to this section should seek to understand and position foundational learning more dialectically, in terms of its processes, relations and historical trajectories, rather than as a fixed “thing”.

2. Value in numbers: metrics and financing

This section will have two parts. The first part will explore the usefulness of the metrics for measuring foundational learning. Contributions may consider the efficacy of International Large-Scale Assessments (ILSA's) which have been around since the 1960's and the experience of regional instruments, such as Africa's PACMEC and SACMEC and Latin America's Laboratio (LLECE). Critical assessments of the experiences and contributions of initiatives such as the OECD's PISA, USAID's EGRA and EGMA, and the citizen-led assessments within the PAL Network to improving foundational learning and understandings of foundational learning will be very welcome. Papers may focus also focus exclusively on critically examining the World Bank's Learning Poverty Index, or the UIS methodology for measuring targets 4.1.1 and 4.7.1. The second part will explore and describe the financing available for foundational learning, looking both at the contributions of larger donor agencies and national governments. The critical points of interest here are about how decisions are made: whether there are explicit links to outcomes data revealed in the metrics, and how narrowly resources are focused, specifically are there opportunity costs for other SDG4 goals as a consequence of the emphasis on foundational learning.

3. Foundational insights from early childhood and extra-mural activities

That children thrive and develop secure foundational skills for life when they enjoy secure, positive relationships with adults who know how to support their development and learning is instinctive and powerfully affirmed by experience in the early childhood field. Foundational learning is understood in the context of developing social and emotional skills, and, importantly, through play. These ideas persist in notions such as transversal and transferrable skills that UNICEF, UNESCO and others regard to be foundational. Is the essential insight here that foundational learning needs to be as broad and as deep as possible? What do pursuits such as sports, music, drama reveal about application, collaboration, creativity, developing technique, and discipline teach that are fundamental and foundational.

4. Learning from implementation

Mini case studies on implementing foundational learning may also be submitted for this section. These should be based on at least two interviews policy-makers, teachers, or students, a review of materials used, and, if possible, one or two lesson observations. Papers in this section may review any current initiative to promote FLN (looking at the objectives, governance, management, effectiveness in implementation, support and training etc). The initiative may be linked to one of the major agencies or banks, led independently by national governments especially in the global South. Critical reviews of independent initiatives led by social movements or civil society organisations and in partnership with local or national government will be especially welcome. Contributors should be aware that uncritical promotional pieces for any program or methodology will not be acceptable.

5. Revisiting the futures of education

Given the challenges of the current historical moment – the ravages of perpetual war, the stalling of real action on climate change, the accelerating loss of biodiversity, the vulnerabilities and needs for safety revealed by the COVID pandemic – is it possible to field a version of quality education or even foundational learning that is oblivious to these realities. Transferable skills such as socio-emotional skills already are recognised to be part of foundational learning by UNESCO and UNICEF, and we welcome the assertion in the recent GEMR report on foundational learning in Africa that a focused curriculum need not be unambitious. Contributions to this section should will explore how ambitious it is possible to be, ideally through critically exploring initiatives or ideas for initiatives that integrate information about climate change, the place of humans in complex ecosystems, and concerns for safety and inclusion, human solidarity, democratic participation into the materials and methodologies for foundational learning as well as curricula for primary schools. Once again, contributors should be aware that we are seeking critical reflections and not promotion pieces.

Key readings and resources:

NORRAG Special Issue 09 explores the redoubled emphasis on foundational learning that has emerged at this midway point to SDG2030. The Gates Foundation, which launched its Global Education Program in 2018, casts foundational learning even more narrowly as [Foundational Numeracy and Literacy \(FLN\)](#). A compelling article by the late Girindre Beharry, who devised the strategy, published in April 2021, "[The](#)

[Pathway to Progress on SDG 4 Requires the Global Education Architecture to Focus on Foundational Learning and to Hold Ourselves Accountable For Achieving It](#) catalysed a wide discussion in the education field. Beharry's paper occasioned a collection of essays in the Centre for Global Development's "[The Pathway to Progress on SDG 4: A Symposium](#)" that provide a useful departure point for this NORRAG Special Issue. The World Bank's, [Foundational Learning Compact](#), a Trust Fund of approximately US\$23 billion, envisages a systemic strategic policy approach, however, its flagship notion and only indicator, Learning Poverty, which was developed in collaboration with UNESCO UIS, assesses only ability to read and understand a simple text by age 10. A recently released Global Education Monitoring Report publication, [Born to Learn](#), the first of two written with the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA), spotlights basic education completion and foundational learning in Africa. The report eschews a deficit narrative on failing systems but focuses on systemic elements; it argues that while national visions for education should be based around foundational learning targets and policies, focused curricula need not be less ambitious curricula.