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Learning Teams for Foundational Learning

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About this research note

Learning team approaches were put forward in the 2019 *Transforming the Education Workforce* report as a way to rethink the design, support, and functioning of the education workforce to promote quality education for all. Learning teams were referenced in the 2023 Global Education Evidence Advisory Panel (GEEAP) Smart Buys Report¹ as a promising investment, that requires more evidence. This note aims to set the agenda for further research on learning team approaches by defining what they are, briefly synthesizing the evidence for them, and providing a few examples of how they have been harnessed to improve foundational learning. As a first step in moving this agenda forward, the Learning Generation Initiative's Education Workforce Initiative is partnering with the Open University's Centre for the Study of Global Development to undertake a multi-country research agenda with the aim of developing a typology of learning teams, identifying foundational factors for their effectiveness across contexts, highlighting barriers and enablers to scale, and illustrating how they succeed and become embedded in education systems.

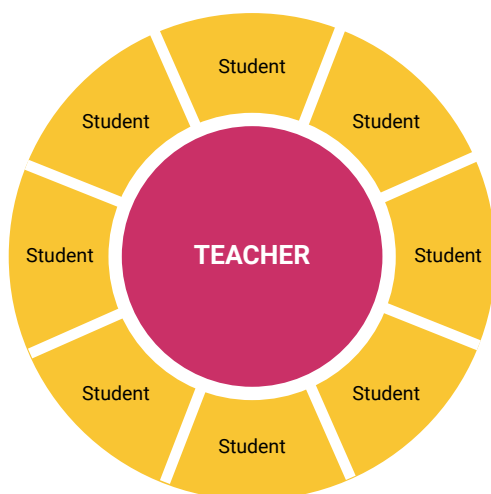
What are learning team approaches?

Learning team approaches aim for groups of education professionals that collaborate at every level—classroom, school, district, and central—to ensure learning for all. There is no one model for these teams; they are different in every context and at every level in the system. They can include qualified teachers, specialist teachers, volunteers, pedagogical coaches, and school leaders and managers. They also can engage professionals from other sectors where relevant, such as health and welfare specialists. Learning teams intentionally engage parents and the wider community to draw on local knowledge and support.

Although education rarely employs formal team-based approaches, examples of informal collaboration already exist in many systems, with teaching assistants, specialists, school leaders, and parents working alongside teachers and students. However, roles beyond that of the teacher are rarely supported systematically to leverage their skills and expertise.

One of the most important elements of learning team approaches is that they leverage a variety of areas of expertise and experience in intentional collaboration to address the specific needs of each child, including their health and socio-emotional wellbeing. This represents a shift from the standard design, where teachers tend to be siloed and undertake many different roles, to a design where the diverse needs of learners can be met more effectively and efficiently by a team of adults working together.

CURRENT CLASS DESIGN



LEARNING TEAM DESIGN



Why do we need to consider learning team approaches to improve foundational learning?

Countries are increasingly prioritizing foundational learning—basic literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional skills—as they realize children are leaving school without the essential building blocks required for future education, career, and life opportunities. The recent COVID-19 pandemic has only compounded the learning crisis and exacerbated existing inequalities. Evidence shows that **teachers** are critical to boosting foundational learning levels,² yet many countries struggle with teacher shortages. Teachers also often work in challenging conditions while trying to fulfill diverse roles without sufficient training, support, or professional development. They tend to teach in relative isolation, in an outdated model of one teacher, one classroom. This means collaboration with and support from other professionals is limited and ad hoc, even though evidence shows that **peer collaboration** can positively impact teacher learning and the quality of instruction.³ Pairing new teachers with more experienced teachers through induction and mentoring could help students benefit from the expertise of the most capable teachers and the support of other adults.⁴

Teachers need strong professional development to be able to provide tailored and targeted instruction. Other roles close to teachers—particularly **school and middle-tier leaders**—have been shown to support teachers in improving their practice and in motivating them to sustain change.⁵ Promising practice suggests that **more practical and individualized professional development for teachers from school and district leaders, particularly through cluster-based coaching and mentoring and peer-to-peer learning**, can improve teacher practice and student learning outcomes.⁶ A study in Kenya that was part of the Primary Math and Reading (PRIMR) Initiative found that teacher coaching improved literacy in Kenyan public schools and non-formal settings.⁷

Randomized evaluations have shown that understanding a student’s level of learning, and tailoring instruction accordingly, consistently improves foundational learning outcomes when implemented well.⁸ However, teachers are not supported or do not have the capacity to do this for every learner, especially in classrooms with a high teacher-to-pupil ratio. We know that specialist and complementary **education support roles** can be effective in promoting inclusion and helping to reach those left behind.⁹ Teaching assistants have also been shown to help individual pupils or small groups using a specific approach that they have been trained to deliver.¹⁰ Those outside the formal education workforce can also provide support. One learning team approach that has consistently helped improve foundational learning is Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL). This approach focuses on improving literacy and numeracy skills by assessing each student to understand their unique needs and where they are on their learning journey and then targeting multifaceted instructional practices for their actual level of learning. TaRL programs led by trained **volunteers and NGO staff** have consistently led to gains in learning outcomes.¹¹

Language of instruction is another challenge to foundational learning. Teaching children in a language they use at home has the potential to support foundational skills, yet 40 percent of children globally are excluded from learning because they are taught in a language they do not fully speak or understand.¹² Children who fall behind in early language skills before formal schooling are less likely to be successful beginning readers.¹³ Research shows that **parents** are key to early language and literacy development, but education systems rarely strategically engage them. In Chile, the success of the Infancia Primero program has led to a nationwide scaling up of the practice of supporting families to promote young children’s cognitive, language, socio-emotional, and psychomotor skills. Parents receive read-at-home strategies and play-based materials from learning teams made up of a lead teacher and two assistants from the community.¹⁴ There is also evidence that **members of the community**—such as community workers, national service personnel, and trained volunteers—can provide support with instruction in students’ mother tongue to address barriers to foundational learning.¹⁵ In Ghana, the Complementary Education Program used trained local facilitators to support the local language of instruction for literacy, numeracy, and other skills relevant to the local realities. The program showed significant improvements in learning outcomes.¹⁶

Foundational learning is dependent on other student outcomes, particularly health and wellbeing.¹⁷ Cross-sector coordination between education and **health and social services** can support inclusion and ensure that the broader needs of students are met so they are prepared to learn. In Kenya, community health volunteers (CHVs) in the Wasichana Wetu Wafaulu program (“Let Our Girls Succeed”)¹⁸ helped gather data about at-risk children and the locations of out-of-school girls. The program encouraged families to support girls in attending school and followed up on issues of wellbeing and safeguarding, referring girls for additional support where necessary. This was done through regular home visits conducted as part of their health work and visiting girls at schools. During the COVID-19 pandemic, CHVs were key to ensuring that vulnerable girls had access to learning. CHVs extended their responsibilities to include monitoring girls’ learning engagement, discussing the importance of continued

education with families, and bringing girls' schoolwork to and from their schools and teachers. The extended role of CHVs led to an impressive level of learning continuity for many disadvantaged girls, with over 90 percent of households surveyed making use of the learning materials they received.¹⁹

Emerging evidence suggests that team-based approaches, what we call **“learning team approaches,”** are an innovative and effective way to directly respond to these challenges by harnessing existing human capacity and investing in social capital through facilitating intentional and relevant collaboration across the system.²⁰

Learning teams: Prioritizing the social and relational aspects of education change

“Learning team approaches” put the social and relational aspects of educational change front and center. The concept of a learning team approach draws on social network theory, which emphasizes the importance of how formal and informal relationships and networks inhibit or promote change through knowledge transfer and behavior shifts, rather than just explaining impact in terms of the isolated characteristics of individuals and organizations.²¹ Learning team approaches acknowledge that there is often existing human capital in education systems that is neglected, and therefore, existing skills and areas of expertise are underutilized. However, learning team approaches focus on the nexus of human and social capital, rather than focusing on investment in human capital alone. In their 2012 work on professional capital in education, Hargreaves and Fullan highlight the importance of human capital and social capital, but the authors emphasize that human capital as a lead strategy is not as influential as social capital. They note that it is more effective to “use the group to change the group,” as evidence shows that investing in the collective capacity of a group is more impactful than just supporting the skills of individuals.²²

Learning team approaches also recognize that environmental factors—organizational structure, access to resources, culture, and governance, among others—influence relationships and social behavior. Learning teams prioritize collaboration as one way to address these constraints. They understand collaboration as a continuum with different purposes and potential outcomes.²³

It is important to note that learning team approaches influence learning outcomes when used in conjunction with interventions that have proven impact. Sometimes learning team approaches are a core component of an intervention, but often they serve to complement and enhance impact in “indirect” ways, including through the collaboration and relationship-building required for interventions to be owned and adapted by local communities.

Examples of learning teams for foundational learning in low- and middle-income contexts

While evidence around the use of learning teams is still relatively nascent in low- and middle-income contexts, this section provides examples of programs using learning team approaches that improved foundational learning outcomes. Although learning team approaches were a component of the success, often these studies do not attempt to isolate their impact or examine how they contributed to improved foundational learning.

South Africa: Teaching assistants

Funda Wandé, a South African nonprofit organization established to address the country's foundational learning crisis, has designed quality interventions and associated materials that have improved primary-level literacy and numeracy. In the province of Limpopo, half of Funda Wandé's intervention schools received one teaching assistant per teacher **to aid in classroom management and increase the frequency of small group and one-on-one teaching.** These assistants were selected from the Presidential Youth Employment Initiative's Basic Education Employment Initiative (BEEI) and underwent an intensive recruitment process by Funda Wandé, which included literacy and numeracy assessments. The assistants were given an initial two-month training to be able to assist teachers with administrative tasks, handle learner and teacher support materials, identify and support struggling learners, and conduct remedial exercises with small groups. TAs received ongoing training and mentorship and had access to peer learning with other teacher assistants throughout the program. TAs also received a monthly stipend, paid by the government.²⁴

A recent four-year (2019–2022) randomized control trial revealed significant improvements in foundational reading and mathematics skills among learners in classrooms with Funda Wandé TAs.²⁵ By the end of grade two, these learners had outperformed their peers in non-TA schools by around 1.25 additional years of learning. More specifically, in reading proficiency, the intervention had a positive effect that translated to 27 percent of a year's worth of learning for grade two learners. The presence of Funda Wandé TAs also increased the percentage of

learners passing single-digit addition and subtraction by 16 and 22 percentage points, respectively. Teachers commended the **effectiveness of the TAs, emphasizing their helpfulness and positive impact in the classroom.**

India: Teaching at the Right Level volunteers

One of Pratham Education Foundation's pioneer programs, Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL), has transformed the Indian education structure by grouping lower-primary-age children based on their learning needs to receive tailored instruction. **An essential ingredient of the model is collaborative facilitation of learning that brings together all relevant stakeholders—families, communities, teachers, and head teachers—to support children's learning.** The program has been rigorously evaluated and shown positive and significant effects on student learning outcomes. It has also been scaled and adapted to multiple countries.²⁶ The TaRL methodology has proven to be effective **whether implemented by locally recruited and trained volunteers outside school hours or used by trained government schoolteachers** during the school day or at camps during the summer holidays.²⁷ Based on the TaRL methodology and an associated pedagogy called Combined Activities for Maximized Learning (CAMaL), Pratham launched a remedial reading and mathematics education camp for children in grades three to five in India. The camps support young children who are behind in their basic skills through up to 50 different sessions that take place throughout the school year, which are tailored to the individual learner's level. These camps are led by trained full-time staff members who receive **assistance from locally trained volunteers.** The camps have directly reached over 400,000 children, and among those who have had access to the camps, there has been a 51 percent increase in reading of at least grade two texts and a 43 percent increase in the number of children who can recognize numbers.²⁸

Nigeria: Coaches and Professional Learning Circles

The Education Development Center and USAID's Nigeria's Northern Education Initiative Plus program (2015–2021) aimed to improve reading outcomes for lower primary school students and increase access to basic education. Teachers received training on reading instruction, continuous assessment, and the creation of safe learning environments. **A key element of the program was ongoing support for teachers through the provision of external coaches and professional learning circles at the school and cluster levels. The coaching and professional learning circles included trained teachers, head teachers, and school support officers.** Principal quality assurance officers and reading coordinators, who were project staff, mentored school support officers, conducted joint coaching visits with them each month, and guided them in their coaching. The program increased teacher collaboration and peer learning as well as student performance in oral reading fluency across grades two and three by approximately 2 to 13 correct words per minute.²⁹

Togo: Itinerant teachers

In response to the Education for All mandate, Togo developed a pilot initiative for itinerant teachers in 2010, building on existing work from Light for the World, which has since been universally institutionalized.³⁰ The use of itinerant teachers in Togo goes beyond the classroom. **Itinerant teachers not only work with mainstream teachers to support individual students but also provide home visits to better engage parents in their child's education,** sensitizing them to the importance of education and providing specialized training, such as sign language.³¹

Itinerant teachers provide more individualized learning for the student and have been shown to improve a student's academic performance and likelihood of staying in the education system. The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education and Literacy has embedded the use of itinerant teachers in the education sector plan, which includes formal training and coverage of their salaries. Because of the shortage of itinerant teachers, they often work across several schools and have limited daily availability to support children in need. As a result, the program has adopted a peer-to-peer approach, where itinerant teachers share resources and responsibilities with the primary classroom teacher to help target students when needed. When the program was originally adopted, primary classroom teachers feared that itinerant teachers would monitor their role and interaction with students, but the program has successfully demonstrated that both types of teachers can support one another and collaborate to build capacity where it might not have been feasible before.³²

Uganda: Phone tutoring by community education volunteers

As a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, Ugandan schools were closed for 22 months, resulting in an estimated 2.8 years of learning loss for children.³³ In late 2021, the organization Building Tomorrow, in partnership with the NGO Youth Impact, investigated the impact of a **low-tech tutoring intervention to stem learning loss in**

some of the most rural parts of the country. Ugandan learners in upper primary schools were placed into several groups, including those who received a practice set of numeracy problems weekly and those who received the practice set plus a 20-minute weekly **tutoring phone call from a community education volunteer (CEV)**, who is a resident member of the community trained to serve as a grassroots education “extension agent.”

The students who worked with a CEV showed greater learning gains than those who did not work with a CEV (equivalent to 1.1 learning-adjusted years of schooling), illustrating that the use of individualized phone-based instruction provided by community volunteers can be used to mitigate foundational learning gaps.³⁴ Between 2018 and 2022, the growth of learners who could perform basic math functions and read at least a paragraph increased from 2 percent to 42 percent, and from 19 percent to 82 percent, respectively.³⁵

Benefits of learning team approaches

The Transforming the Education Workforce report outlined several key benefits of learning team approaches:

- **More effective teaching:** Planning and teaching in teams; peer collaboration; coaching and mentoring; learning assistants and trainee teachers supporting proven teaching and learning strategies
- **More instructional time:** Learning assistants and trainee teachers supporting classroom management and routine/administrative activities task shifted to these roles; administrative support and technology
- **Greater access to specialist expertise:** Identifying gaps in subject and pedagogy expertise and devising solutions to provide needed expertise potentially across schools, harnessing technology where appropriate
- **Better support for inclusion:** Access to specialist inclusion expertise; classroom support for children with greatest needs; and better links to the community
- **On-the-job learning and support:** Planning and teaching in teams; peer collaboration; coaching and mentoring
- **Improved workforce motivation:** More team working; support; development; and a greater variety of career opportunities

Learning team approaches: Implications for policy and practice

As these examples illustrate, learning team approaches harness the unique skills and experience of the wider education workforce, the community, and professionals from other sectors to work together to support foundational learning. These approaches are often delivered by NGOs as time-bound projects. However, embedding these approaches in government policy and practice, and ensuring all roles and their collaboration are planned for and supported, is likely to lead to greater scalability and sustainability of foundational learning outcomes. Strong middle-tier and school leadership are key to supporting collaborative efforts and implementing these types of policies at the local level. The recommendations below provide a starting point for governments considering using a learning teams approach in education planning.

- First, governments could identify existing capacity within their systems that is not being fully utilized and map out concrete ways to integrate that capacity. This requires looking at the education professionals across all levels of the system and assessing their relationships and interdependencies. It is important to recognize that even those roles not directly engaged with instruction, such as staff responsible for teacher deployment, still affect teaching and learning.
- In some cases, it may be necessary to create new roles to address specific needs, such as itinerant teachers to help provide greater individualized support for students, pedagogical coaches to support school leaders with instructional leadership, or community education workers to ensure inclusion.
- Countries should consider their engagement with families, caregivers, and communities. Can people in these roles be asked to support areas where they have proven impact, such as mother tongue instruction, remedial support, and at-home literacy activities?
- Governments should consider cross-sectoral coordination and collaboration when assessing existing capacity. The food, agriculture, health, and social sectors can all help with meeting students’ basic needs—such as nutrition, mental health, social and emotional wellbeing, and safety—so they are able and ready to learn. The education workforce needs support from other professionals to ensure that the full range of student developmental needs are met, which supports their learning.
- Once existing capacity and additional roles are identified, governments need to plan for intentional collaboration among these actors at different levels of the education system, including understanding where existing collaboration can be leveraged, addressing training needs, and providing mechanisms and resources

to facilitate collective action and feedback.

- Investment in training and professional development for these roles and the middle tier and school leadership is key, ensuring they have the knowledge and competences to facilitate sustained collaboration at the local level and across the levels of the system.
- Most importantly, learning team approaches should prioritize the voices and guidance of those in the education workforce themselves. For a learning team approach to succeed, the workforce must be included in policy and planning discussions from the beginning as an integral stakeholder in scoping, design, and planning processes.

The 2019 *Transforming the Education Workforce* report includes additional guiding questions to consider when using learning team approaches, such as:

- What kind of learning configurations could maximize the skills of different workforce roles and support collaboration?
- How could alternative learning arrangements, including those that are technology-assisted, help utilize different workforce roles to target individual learning needs?
- What interdependencies exist between workforce reforms and other policy initiatives, including wider reforms across the workforce life cycle? For example, if pedagogical coaches are promoting particular teaching standards, are inspectors and supervisors using these standards in their accountability frameworks to send consistent messages to teachers?

An agenda for future research

Further research is needed to understand the enabling factors required for effective learning team approaches across contexts and to understand cost effectiveness. New studies should aim to identify learning teams' unique contributions to improving foundational learning and other important education outcomes, such as inclusion and student wellbeing. Given the significance of leadership for learning team approaches, one area ripe for future investigation is the use of indigenous models of leadership that tend to promote a greater sense of communal purpose and responsibility, such as Ubuntu which is common in sub-Saharan Africa. Future research should also help delineate different types of learning teams and identify how they address specific issues. A greater understanding of the barriers and enablers to scale and how learning team approaches become self-sustaining and embedded in education systems will be key to harnessing the potential of learning teams moving forward.

Now is the time for countries to explore how learning team approaches can promote foundational learning to ensure a thriving present and future for all students.

Please contact the Education Workforce Initiative Head of Research, Katie Godwin (kgodwin@edc.org), if you are interested in further information or would like to contribute to the learning team research.

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