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Understanding the Politics of the Learning Crisis

Steps Ahead on a Long Road

Lant Pritchett

Education has been a core component of the development agenda since before there was a development agenda. In 1948, the UN Declaration of Human Rights declared: 'Everyone has the right to education'. In the seventy years since there has been both massive action to expand education systems and a massive academic literature from a variety of disciplines devoted to education. What could a new drop add to this ocean of ink? This new volume of case studies introduced and edited by Hickey and Hossain makes three distinct and valuable contributions.

First, they orient the key question from the politics of 'schooling'—explaining why governments choose to expand children's 'time served' in a building called a school—to the politics of learning—why is it children learn so much more in some countries' schools than others? They address the question with six country case studies: four African (Ghana, Uganda, South Africa, and Rwanda) and two Asian (Bangladesh and Cambodia) using a common analytical framework.

Second, their framework allows for a 'policy domain' approach that acknowledges that 'just because the tyre is flat doesn't mean the hole is on the bottom'. That is, many approaches to the politics of education assume that if the education sector is dysfunctional in producing learning the fault must lie in the education sector as a policy domain itself—some deficiency in the operation of the sector explained by characteristics or ideas or capabilities in the sector. But the 'domains' approach suggests that perhaps the fault may really lie in the stars—that the failures to promote universal learning are the

result of structures in the larger domain of national politics that lead politi-
cians to have other goals and purposes for schooling (Panglayan 2017).

Third, the six country case studies assess how a particular approach to
'political settlements' helps explain successes and failures in orienting the
education sector around not expanding schooling but actually promoting
learning. The lessons are salutary, but bracing, as none of the 'types' of political
settlement reliably lead to an effective politics of learning. Some political
settlements that involve electoral democracy produce 'competitive clientelism'
that makes it difficult to operate on the long-view of learning performance and
hence formulate and implement effective programmes versus the use schools
for short-term political advantage. While 'dominant' settlements have poten-
tial advantages in this regard over 'competitive clientelism' in being able to
enact longer-term reform agendas, this may or may not lead to effective,
learning-enhancing reforms as opposed to engaging in other political agendas
via schools, like Rwanda's abrupt adoption of English as medium of instruction.

From Schooling to Learning

In 1960, the typical adult (over age 15) in the developing world had only 2.1
years of schooling and 87 per cent of the population had not completed
primary schooling. But, by 2010, the typical adult in the developing world
had 7.5 years of schooling and only 40 per cent had not completed primary.
There was more expansion in schooling in these countries in the last fifty
years than the previous 5,000. Today nearly every child will, at some stage,
enrol in a school. This expansion in formal schooling is a revolution and will
be a milestone in human history.

While there are many studies about the politics of why governments have
expanded schooling, a truly astounding feature of this expansion is how
uniform it has been across countries. While everyone knows that the high-
performing East Asian countries expanded schooling rapidly—Indonesia by
4.5 years, Vietnam by 3.4 years, Thailand by 3.3 years—it might surprise some
to know that countries not widely known for stellar development perform-
ance such as Haiti expanded years of schooling by just as much as any of those
stars: 4.4 years. Malawi expanded years of schooling completed by *more* than
either Vietnam or Thailand.

So while a number of forays into the 'politics of schooling' want to explain
why some countries did more and others less, in my view, the key puzzle for
theories of *schooling* is why so many governments around the world—
including countries with corrupt, non-democratic, human rights-abusing
and otherwise pretty dismal and dysfunctional governments—chose to do so
very much of it.

But the development goal was never 'schooling' for its own sake, the goal was education. The declared purpose of schooling was that children learn and acquire the skills, competencies, knowledge, and dispositions to be successful adults. On this front, tragically, there has been enormously less progress and the progress has been hugely more variable across countries. A couple of examples, which add to those in Chapter 1 of this book, motivate the very rapid recent shift in attention from 'schooling to learning'.

Recently the Indian NGO Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) carried out an assessment of Indian youth aged 14 to 18 to assess their skills (ASER 2018). While these youth were schooled—86 per cent had either completed grade 8 or were still enrolled in school—a shocking number lacked even rudimentary skills. Shown a picture of a girl going to sleep at 10:30 p.m. and then waking up at 5:30 a.m. less than 40 per cent of them could say how long she slept. Less than 40 per cent could calculate the price of a 300 Rupee shirt after a 10 per cent discount. And 27 per cent of those with grade 8 or higher schooling completed could not read a simple paragraph. A question arises: 'how can schooling be so awful that eight years of attendance produces so little in the way of conceptual mastery and competencies?'

The Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) interview a national sample of women aged 15 to 45 and in the newer modules they assess whether women can read a simple declarative sentence such as 'Farming is hard work' in a language of their choosing. In Ghana only 7.6 per cent and in Egypt only 18.2 per cent of women who had completed grade 6 (but no higher) could read a single sentence versus 75.1 per cent Indonesia and 86.1 per cent in Tanzania (Kaffenberger, Pritchett, and Sandefur 2018). So while Ghana's completed years of schooling is 7.7 and is more than Indonesia (6.1) or Tanzania (5.5), a pressing question has to be why primary schooling's ability to convey retained literacy amongst women varies so widely across countries.

As a final illustration of the puzzle to be explained, a recent (and still preliminary) data set has attempted the Herculean task of piecing together all of the existing results from international assessments into a single comparable indicator of the 'average' learning in each country on a scale in which the average OECD country is 500.[1] Figure 10.1 shows the scatter plot of that learning indicator against gross domestic product per capita (GDPPC), just for those countries with (purchasing power adjusted) GDP per capita less than US$10,000. While there is a tendency for richer countries to have higher performance on learning, the differences across countries of similar GDP are striking. Vietnam, for instance, is estimated to have learning of 524

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[1] This is the Altinok, Angrist, and Patrinos (2018) data in its May 2017 version. As this data is not yet finalized nor widely available the specific scores for specific countries may change but the rough points I make here will, I strongly suspect, remain robust.

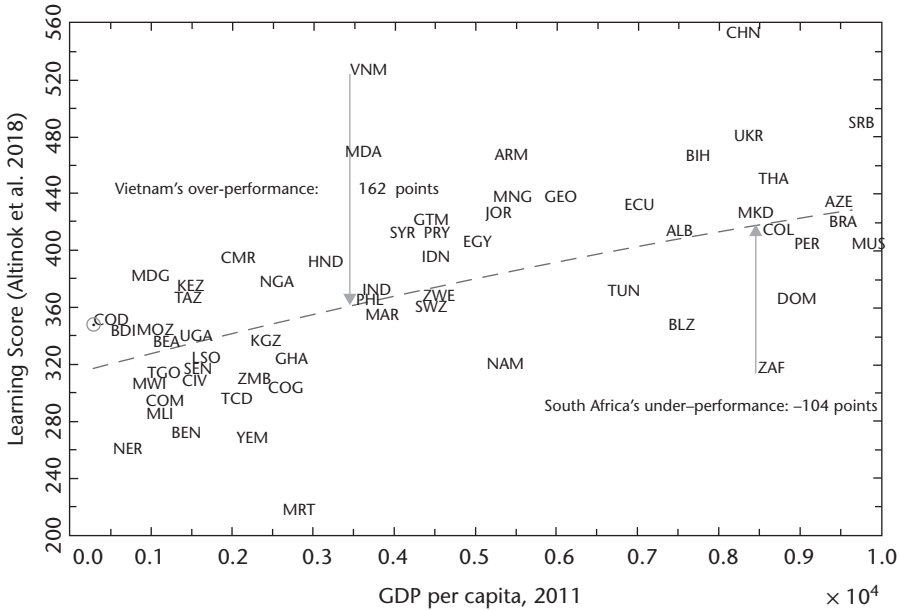## Politics and Education in Developing Countries

Figure 10.1 Learning score and GDP per capita (countries with GDPPC <US$10,000)

(equivalent or better than many rich countries) whereas based on its income alone we would have predicted 362 so it over-performs its income level by 162 points. In contrast, South Africa, with a GDP per capita more than twice that of Vietnam scores only 314 whereas its income would predict 418 and hence under-performs its income level by 104 points. Dominican Republic has a GDP per capita of $8,700 but has a learning score of only 363, placing it below much, much poorer countries such as Kenya and Tanzania. Given the scale of this measure of learning and its typical distribution across students, a rough and ready calculation suggests that the average gap between Vietnam and South Africa of 210 points means that the distributions of student perform-ance essentially do not overlap—that is, nearly every 9th grader in Vietnam has higher learning achievement than nearly every South African 9th grader.

The question this new book brings to the fore is: 'Why have the politics been such that (a) nearly all countries expanded schooling but that (b) some did so with very low learning achievement and some did so with high learning achievement (even at similar levels of national resources)?' There are many narratives about why expansion of basic schooling has become so widespread (and of the timing of that expansion)—and many simple 'response to citizens' or 'political pressure from citizens' models seem to explain that (although these cannot explain the timing or universality of these expansions as many, many, governments that were demonstrably not 'responsive to citizens'

nevertheless expanded schooling (e.g. Pritchett 2004; Paglayan 2017)). But it is not at all clear why 'pressure from citizens' would lead to a rapid expansion of schooling but with schooling of persistently low learning quality. And, as the authors point out, it is pretty obvious that the 'high learning performance conditional on income' countries as shown in Figure 10.1 (where the top eight learning over-performers (largest regression residual) are: Vietnam, China, Moldova, Armenia, Singapore, Ukraine, Korea Republic, and Serbia) is not a list of 'well-functioning liberal democracies' or even stars in generic measures of 'good governance' (e.g. in the World Governance Indicators for 2011, Vietnam was in the bottom third on indicators for Voice and Accountability, Rule of Law, Control of Corruption, and Regulatory Quality).

This is very much the right question and, on the face of it a puzzling question as it means many countries expanded schooling but without accomplishing at least some of the priority education objectives that were touted as the purpose of expanding schooling—no country claimed they were trying to expand schooling but not learning. This is also very much the right question as one might hope it could lead to an answer of what might be done to accelerate progress in learning.

Policy Domains

A first component of this book's approach is to adopt a 'domain of powers' approach to explaining variation across countries in learning achievement. There is a domain of the general political settlement of a country and then the domain of education per se. This is important as it might seem natural to explain education failures (or successes) by education factors. Of course, on some proximate level in a causal chain that is near true by definition. That is, if we can specify what leads to learning (starting from proximate determinants as simple as 'time-on-task', and having teachers who know the material to be taught and students motivated to learn) then, on a proximate level we can 'account' for improved learning via these proximate pathways. It is a (near) truism that 'if education reform doesn't change what happens in the classroom it cannot change outcomes'. But to trace differences in the sufficient causes that explain persistent learning differences across countries one has to push to the proximate determinants of the proximate determinants and even to the proximate determinants of the proximate determinants of the proximate determinants.

Before you are convinced this is just excessive repetition of the word 'proximate', let me give a concrete example. The Service Delivery Indicator data have been collected on a nationally representative basis in seven African countries. Figure 10.2 and 10.3 show two proximate determinants of the
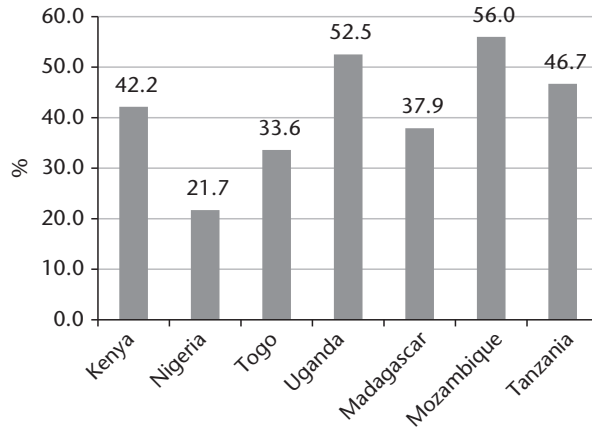
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Figure 10.2 Per cent of teachers absent from the classroom during the scheduled period
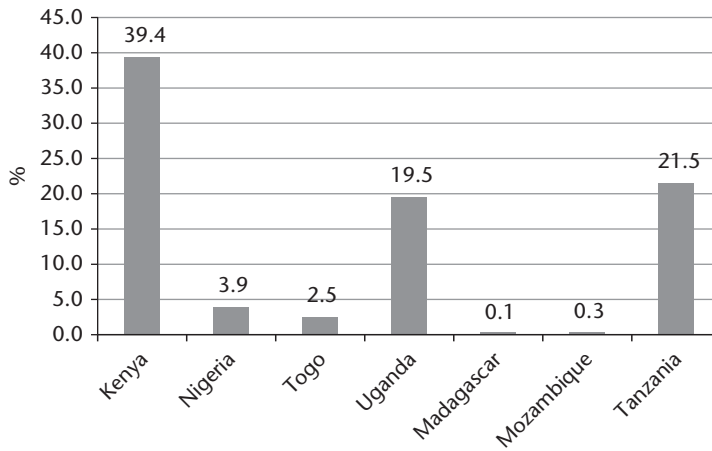*Source*: World Bank Databank, Service Delivery Indicators.

Figure 10.3 Per cent of teachers with minimum subject knowledge (as defined by SDI)
Source: World Bank Databank, Service Delivery Indicators.

classroom experience that are widely regarded to be relevant to student learn-ing: whether a teacher is present (Figure 10.2) and whether the teacher has adequate subject matter knowledge (Figure 10.3).

As an explanation of why in the DHS data for Togo only 22.6 per cent of women who completed grade 6 could read a sentence it probably helps to know that at any given time there was a 1/3 chance the teacher was absent from the classroom, reducing time-on-task, and that there was only a 2.5 per cent chance the student was exposed to a teacher with minimally adequate content knowledge as those are *proximate* determinants of learning.

But this leads to the obvious question: why is it that Togo's education system is such that only 2.5 per cent of classroom teachers in Togo demonstrate minimum subject knowledge (versus, say, roughly 20 per cent in Uganda and Tanzania). Is this a feature of the education of the potential labour force—there simply are not adequate candidates? Is it a feature of something about the education sector and its policies that are the proximate determinant of the low level of this proximate determinant? Is teacher pay too low to attract good candidates to teaching? Are the methods of selection not present to screen out candidates with low subject knowledge?

But even if we could explain the low level of student performance in Togo as low subject content knowledge of teachers and even if that were explained as the result of identifiable policy stances in the education sector, one would still want to ask: What is it about Togo that leads it to have those education sector policy stances? Was it something specific to the configuration of ideas, interests and powers amongst the relevant actors within the education domain of Togo versus other places that explains the policy stance outcomes? Or what if those policy stances are not determined by features of the education domain unique to Togo but rather are determined by broader political factors outside the education domain? What therefore explains low student performance is both the low time-on-task and teacher subject knowledge (amongst other proximate factors) and that is itself explained by features of policy stances within the education domain that are themselves not exogenous or autonomous determinants but are influenced by the general political context.

I think the 'policy domains' approach is a useful corrective. As one of the authors of the World Development Report 2004, which introduced an 'accountability' framework, we had in mind something very much like this. That is, in our framework outcomes of service delivery (and basic education was included as a paradigm case) were the result of four distinct relationships of accountability: *politics* (between citizens and the state), *compact* (between the executive actors of the state and organizational providers), *management* (between organizations and frontline providers) and *client power* (the direct relationship of service recipients and frontline providers and organizations). Our purpose in emphasizing an analytic approach with all four relationships was that, at the time (early 2000s), far and away the dominant discourse at the World Bank was to discuss only the 'management' relationship. That is, most deficits in service delivery were treated as technical problems in organizational design and implementation that were addressable by the leaders of the relevant provider organizations who, it was imagined, both had sufficient autonomy to act and could be induced to do so with sufficient evidence that specified action(s) of a policy, project or programmatic kind would lead to improved outcomes. This was a natural bias of the donor-driven discourse as the direct 'client/recipient' of donor loans and grants was the organization

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and hence 'client-driven' behaviour was in 'partnership' with the provider organizations and hence the natural focus was on what these organizations could do to improve the state of affairs, and the entirely natural (and not entirely undesirable) bias for optimism led to the idea that there was adequate space of action within the 'management' relationship.

The idea that the deep causal determinants of poor education performance is not in the 'policy domain' of education nor in the 'problem definitions' or 'policy ideas' within the education sector at all but is rather in deeper political determinants, such as the nature of the political settlement, is an important idea. This is a useful corrective to the (self-serving) bias of academics and researchers that 'rigorous evidence' about 'what works' is, in and of itself, an important causal binding constraint to improved performance.

Political Settlement

The main contribution of this volume is applying an instantiation of 'political settlement' to six country cases. As elaborated in Chapter 2 and drawing on work by Khan (2010) and Levy (2014) they stipulate that the political settlement is influenced by (1) power relations and orderings that structure the ruling coalition, (2) material incentives, and (3) paradigmatic ideas. They offer a two by two typology of political settlements with the dimensions of whether 'elite cohesion' is high or low and whether 'organizational and institutional complexity', by which they mean the extent to which administrative processes are personalized or determined largely by formal, impersonalized processes, is high or low. The result is a classification of the political settlement in a country at a point in time into a set of six categories (which I number by Roman numerals to indicate these are categories that are not ordered on any single metric or ordered on any expected sequence, for example, Type III is not 'better' nor necessarily comes after Type II).

This approach brings two important advances on what might be called the 'typical' approach of development experts. A description, perhaps a tad caricatured, of the 'typical' approach is to assume that problems can either (a) be solved 'technocratically' within a given 'policy domain' by sufficiently clever application of known sectoral approaches (something like 'best practice') or (b) that if the problem is 'politics' then well-functioning electoral democracy will, eventually, be sufficient to create the pressure for governments to adopt solutions (or authorize those in the policy domain to adopt solutions) for the quality of education.[2] Relative to that, this approach brings two advances.

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[2] I owe this structuring of approaches into 'fix the sector technocratically' or 'fix the politics with democracy' to Agustina Paglayan.

Table 10.1 Typology of political orders

Closed-Access Orders (all except Type VI)

Type I:	Stable Political Settlement (Types II-V)		Type VI:
No stable political settlement open conflict or instability (e.g. Yemen, Somalia, DRC, Syria)		Personalized (low organizational and institutional complexity)	Impersonal (high organizational and institutional complexity)	**Open access orders** ('Developed' polities, 'rules' systems with high state capability and stable democratic political processes (e.g. Denmark, Germany, Japan)
	High elite cohesion	Type II: **Dominant-personalized** (e.g. South Korea 1960s, Rwanda, Ethiopia)	Type IV **Dominant Rule-by-law** (e.g. South Korea 1980s–1990s, Singapore, South Africa post-apartheid)	
	Low elite cohesion	Type III: **Competitive clientelist** (e.g. Bangladesh 2000s, Malawi, Kenya, Ghana 1990s–2000s)	Type V **Competitive Rule-by-law** (e.g. India)	

Source: Adapted from Figure 10.2 and text, Chapter 2.

First, it essentially never uses the word 'democracy'. I think many have come to believe uses of the word are mostly hoary or hortatory and that, without predicates, the word 'democracy' conveys too little content to be of use. Note that it is possible that any of the six types in Table 10.1 could have held an election as a means of determining the current executive—but it is obvious that holding an election in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in 2006 did not, in and of itself, magically move DRC from Type I and create a stable country-wide political settlement. This book advances arguments, which have emerged in other policy domains, that elections in weakly institutionalized environments can produce 'competitive clientelist' conditions that are inimical to undertaking some type of reforms. The scatter plot in Figure 10.1 itself illustrates that 'democracy' is neither necessary (Vietnam counter-example) nor sufficient (South Africa counter-example) for high learning achievement in schools.

In contrast, 'dominant' settlements can create conditions in which major reforms can be undertaken and implemented. That said, it is not guaranteed that the reforms of dominant settlements will be conducive to improving learning. Their case study of the overnight move to English language as the medium of instruction in Rwanda is an example of the type of reform only

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possible in a dominant settlement but which is of at least dubious efficacy in improving learning in the short to medium run due to its disruptive effects.

Second, it is, in and of itself, a major advance to acknowledge that the very notion of 'the politics of X' (where, in this case, X is achieving high learning in basic schooling) needs to be made specific to the type of government. In particular, it is easy to assume that Type VI countries represent the 'normal' or 'paradigm' case and models and frames and tools developed for those cases can be transplanted, with perhaps only minor tweaks, to other cases (or, alternatively, that there is no useful 'politics of X' until a country reaches Type VI). I am stunned at the frequency with which, in academic seminars and the like, I hear the words 'median voter theorem' described as the 'standard' and expect the onus to be on the presenter as to why their predictions would differ from this 'standard'.

But to my view, the 'politics of X' are completely different in a 'deals' world (Types I to V) than in a 'rules' world (Type VI).[3] In a rules world politics is about rules which are expected to be neutrally and impersonally enforced by organizations that (roughly) enforce the rules—which is itself a mapping from facts to actions—with rough fidelity. Rules, by creating groups of people who are similarly affected, create 'interests' and 'interest groups' as people who have common costs and benefits from different rules. But this is precisely what 'low organizational and institutional complexity' or 'low state capability' undermine. Precisely what 'personalized' implies is that expected outcomes are indexed by *who* you are as a *person* not by *what* you do or by any determinant factual condition, like actually complying or not complying with a rule.

This means we need, and the book pursues the goal of, something like 'what are the politics of learning in Type III (competitive clientelist) countries' and 'what are the politics of learning in Type IV (dominant rule of law) countries' with no expectation that these are at all alike or that either is similar to the 'politics of learning in Type VI (open access order) countries'.

It is a truism that 'no battle plan survives contact with the enemy' or, as the sage Mike Tyson put it more recently, 'Everyone has a plan 'till they get punched in the mouth'. Having been involved in my academic career with a number of exercises that attempted to use a framework to structure case studies, my experience is that the raw phenomena of country/regional experiences in all their messy contextual complexity survive collision with analytical frameworks, but not always vice versa.

In this instance, I had three reservations.

The first concern, and one that the researchers cannot be held responsible for, is that there is just no data on learning performance that is comparable

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[3] On 'deals', see Pritchett, Sen, and Werker (2018).

across countries or within countries over time. To do research on the question 'What are the conditions under which countries adopt reforms that are effective at promoting learning?' one would have to be able to have at least some rough ability to get at learning performance 'with' and 'without'. But precisely what the focus on schooling has done is create international and national systems in which data on schooling (e.g. enrolments, grade attainment) is widely available across countries and over time with at least modest reliability but data on learning is piecemeal, not widely comparable, and very, very few countries have comparable learning assessments spanning more than just a few years. This means all of the case studies can only really investigate 'what are the conditions in which countries adopt reforms which are claimed to be about learning (or which conventional wisdom or our beliefs think are likely to promote learning?)' which is perhaps an interesting question, but recent research encourages caution on that score. For instance, Indonesia recently doubled teacher wages on the not implausible premise that this would be 'quality improving' but so far the evidence is that this has been 'Double for Nothing' (de Ree et al. 2017). This is important because it is possible, if not plausible, that effective and ineffective reforms have different politics and it is possible, if not plausible, that effective reforms are more politically difficult than reforms that are putatively and rhetorically justified by learning but which are bound to be ineffective.

My second reservation is that one plausible conjecture from the distinction between 'dominant settlements—personalized' and 'Competitive clientelist' and the raw fact that many long-term authoritarian governments have better outcomes than 'democratic' governments (e.g. Indonesia versus India or Vietnam versus the Philippines) is that the longer-term horizon and more 'encompassing' interests of the 'dominant' settlements allow a greater latitude for creating and sustaining reform than do 'competitive clientelist' contexts. But this does not come through the case studies clearly at all—not a fault of method but of the sometimes very stubborn nature of the facts. So, for instance, while the South Africa case study contrasting Western Cape and Eastern Cape provinces is full of rich material (and draws on an additional volume just on South Africa (Levy et al. 2018)), in the end while the configuration of socio-economic, political settlement and inherited institutions between Western Cape and Eastern Cape (Table 6.4) may explain the superior learning performance of Western Cape, it is not clear why the Western Cape lags learning performance in say, Nairobi Kenya (a much poorer place) nor why progress has proven so fitful, even in Western Cape. Similarly, the 'dominant settlements' of Rwanda and Cambodia had very different trajectories, but neither of them is a clear success nor do they reveal a particularly common 'dominant settlement' politics. I would rate the claim in the conclusion that 'Comparative analysis of our cases, each of which represented different types

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of political settlement, suggests consistent dynamics can be discerned . . . ' as 'not yet proven'.

Third, the framework emerges as helpful, but not granular enough yet. I think the 'domains of power' and 'political settlement' approaches are an advance over the (implicit) idea that the 'politics of learning-oriented reforms' can be usefully approached without a political settlement (or 'nature of polit-ics') typology and that the first 'lesson' in Chapter 9 that 'Elite commitment to education reform is shaped by the political settlement' is useful. However, other 'lessons' in Chapter 9 reveal the distance the research agenda has yet to go: 'Diverse actors play important roles', 'Political competition and domin-ance influence reforms in complex ways', 'Informal power and politics is critical', and 'We need to acknowledge idiosyncratic factors'. All of these statements are likely true (as their negation seems false) and perhaps useful correctives—perhaps previous approaches thought informal power was not critical or that only limited actors played important roles—but it is not clear how such statements can inform concrete action.

The book makes a creditable and credible start down the path to identifying the political drivers of the learning crisis. That it does not both start and arrive fully in the same journey is my judgement from the reading of the six cases, but cannot be taken as criticism, and I would encourage each reader to form their own judgement.

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