MAKING PEDAGOGICAL REFORMS WORK IN CLASSROOMS

PRACTICAL LESSONS FROM EGYPT, INDIA, AND MEXICO

Ghulam Omar Qargha and Rachel Dyl

with Ayman Alhusseini, Apoorva Bhatnagar, Gabriela Lozano Campos, Iriana Ferreyra, Amit Kumar, Nariman Moustafa, Sreehari Ravindranath, Sudeshna Roychoudhury, Menna Saieed, and Joseph Thomas

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ACRONYMS

AI	Artificial intelligence
CUE	Center for Universal Education
E4S	Education for Sharing
FSDD	Foundation for Self-Discovery and Development
IPM	Invisible Pedagogical Mindsets
LMICS	Low- and middle-income countries
NEM	Nueva Escuela Mexicana
NEP 2020	National Education Policy 2020
NGO	Nongovernmental organization
NISHTHA	National Initiative for School Heads and Teachers' Holistic Advancement
RISE	Research on Improving Systems of Education
RPC	Research Policy Collaborative
SPARKS	Strengthening Pedagogical Approaches for Relevant Knowledge and Skills

ABOUT SPARKS

The Strengthening Pedagogical Approaches for Relevant Knowledge and Skills (SPARKS) project, housed in the Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution, is a collaborative, locally grounded, and globally networked research initiative. The primary goal of SPARKS is to understand the impact of culture, local education ecosystems, and learning theories—together the Invisible Pedagogical Mindsets (IPMs)—on classroom practice and education reform. In May of 2024, SPARKS launched Research Policy Collaboratives (RPCs) in Egypt, India, and Mexico. Brookings provided fiscal oversight, cross-country coordination, overall design and research support, while the country teams led stakeholder engagement, contextual adaptation, data collection, interpretation, and country- and global-level dissemination. Across the project, Brookings and the country teams also worked together through virtual Global Network meetings, in-person research exchanges, and convenings to share learning across contexts, refine common framing, and inform the cross-country synthesis.

ABOUT DREAM A DREAM

Dream a Dream is an Indian nonprofit organization working to transform the experience of education for the 130 million children living in poverty in India. The aim is to change the purpose of education toward the idea of thriving for every child. Dream a Dream defines thriving as the ability of every young person to expand to their fullest potential, nurtured by empathetic and compassionate relationships within an equitable and inclusive education system.

ABOUT
EDUCATION FOR SHARING

Education for Sharing (E4S) is an international nonprofit organization that aims to build the capacity of global citizens through educational innovation based on the power of play. Currently, E4S has 10 educational programs focused on civic values, the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and recreational activities and collaborative games. E4S operates in 32 states in Mexico and 11 additional countries. Over 18 years, E4S has worked in 3,877 educational spaces with 30,869 teachers and 697,620 children and youth.

ABOUT
FOUNDATION FOR SELF-DISCOVERY AND DEVELOPMENT

The Foundation for Self-Discovery and Development (FSDD) is an Egyptian nonprofit organization registered under the Ministry of Social Solidarity. FSDD works in regenerative living and learning by promoting popular education, conducting critical and applied research, weaving local and global networks to create alternative education imaginaries, and community organizing. FSDD aims to foster an environment that enables critical inquiry, self-reflection, and civic engagement among students from diverse walks of life; host a scholarly cooperative to amplify, embody, and co-create critical and popular knowledge; and create spaces for practicing new visions of the world.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since the 1990s, repeated waves of national reform and large investments to improve education systems worldwide have expanded access and raised ambitions for learning, however, classroom practice often remains unchanged (Schweisfurth 2013; Tabulawa 2013). Drawing on research from Egypt, India, and Mexico, this synthesis report explores why teaching practice often remains unchanged despite reform efforts, and argues that transforming classroom practice requires more than well-intentioned and well-designed national education reforms. True transformation requires understanding and working with the Invisible Pedagogical Mindsets (IPMs) that shape classroom practice, namely the ways that cultural contexts, education ecosystems, and teachers' preferred learning theories interact with the proposed reforms to influence what teachers regard as good teaching and what they do in their classrooms. Building on research about policy-practice gaps, teacher sensemaking, and learner-centered reform (Coburn 2001; Datnow et al. 2025; Schweisfurth 2013), this report organizes these insights into a practical framework and tests it against evidence from the three country cases.

Using collaborative mixed-methods research conducted by Research Policy Collaboratives in each country, the evidence shows three recurring themes. First, culture shapes how reforms are understood. Teachers widely support aims such as inclusion, holistic development, and community connection, but they also feel responsible for authority, discipline, and character formation. Reforms that call for more student autonomy and horizontal relationships must be translated into these cultural terms if they are to be credible. Second, ecosystem contradictions undermine reform. Policies that call for active, competency-based learning coexist with assessments that reward recall, rushed or disconnected professional development programs, heavy administrative loads, and weak support from middle-tier actors. Third, teachers' preferred

learning theories reveal sophisticated professional judgment. Most teachers already blend transmission and construction of knowledge. Reforms that present "traditional" and "student-centered" approaches as a binary create unnecessary tension.

Across the three countries, teachers emerge not as barriers to reform but as frontline interpreters who work at the intersection of culture, ecosystem constraints, and learning theories. When reforms ignore these IPMs, they remain symbolic and are often translated back into familiar practices. When reforms are designed with IPMs in mind, change becomes both more feasible and more durable (Ferreyra et al. 2026; Moustafa et al. 2026; Ravindranath et al. 2026).

For policymakers, system leaders, and development partners, this has three main implications.

1. Design for translation, not transfer. Before scaling reforms, systematically examine how culture, ecosystems, and learning theories will shape implementation, and build in space for adaptation.
2. Align key parts of the ecosystem, especially assessment, materials, time use, and middle-tier roles, so that they reinforce, rather than undercut, the pedagogies reforms promote.
3. Treat professional learning and co-design as central to reform, not as add-ons. Invest in sustained, practice-based learning for teachers, create structures for collaboration and coaching, and establish mechanisms for teachers and communities to inform ongoing policy decisions.

Taken together, these steps can help move reforms from policy documents into everyday teaching and learning.

INTRODUCTION

Pedagogical reforms must align with local contexts

1.1 The need for education system transformation

Despite billions of dollars invested in improving educational systems over the last few decades (Lewin and Caillods 2001; World Bank 2018), the global learning crisis, the fact that many children attend school without mastering foundational skills at the expected level, persists and, in many contexts, has worsened since the COVID pandemic (Angrist et al. 2022; World Bank 2024). The United Nations Transforming Education Summit, convened in September 2022, emphasized that education systems must fundamentally evolve to meet contemporary social, economic, and civic needs, and that incremental improvements are no longer sufficient (Sengeh and Winthrop 2022; International Commission on the Futures of Education 2021, United Nations 2023).

1.2 Teachers as interpreters of reforms

Why have well-intentioned national education reforms failed to transform classroom practice? Research on teacher sensemaking, policy mediation, and professional practice has long documented that teachers do not simply implement reforms as written. Teachers interpret, adapt, and enact reforms through the lens of their cultural contexts, working conditions, and professional beliefs (Coburn 2001; Datnow et al. 2025). This body of work is substantial in North American and European scholarship, where research communities have devoted sustained attention to how teachers mediate top-down reforms. However, in the discourse surrounding education-reform design and implementation in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), this interpretive dimension remains uncommon

relative to structural explanations such as insufficient resources, inadequate training, and weak institutional capacity. These structural factors are real and important, but they are incomplete. They do not equip policymakers to understand or work with the specific ways that teachers in particular contexts make sense of reforms and decide what to do with them.

The Strengthening Pedagogical Approaches for Relevant Knowledge and Skills (SPARKS) project was designed to address this gap in LMIC policy discourse by examining how pedagogical reforms in Egypt, India, and Mexico interact with the local cultural context, ecosystem conditions, and preferred learning theories that shape how teachers see their work. SPARKS worked through a Research Policy Collaborative (RPC) structure that brought together teachers, policymakers, researchers, and civil society actors (Qargha et al. 2024). The three completed country reports document the country-level findings in detail, and this report draws on those reports to synthesize findings across the three country research projects (Ferreyra et al. 2026; Moustafa et al. 2026; Ravindranath et al. 2026).

Traveling pedagogical reforms

Many pedagogical reforms promoted by international organizations, bilateral aid, and global policy networks trace their origins to Western, high-income education systems, a process scholars describe as policy transfer (Meyer et al. 1997; Ramirez and Boli 1987; Steiner-Khamsi 2013). At the same time, influential approaches have also emerged from the Global South and East, demonstrating that innovation does not flow in only one direction. However, the reforms that most consistently travel through donor priorities, aid conditionalities, and international benchmarking frameworks reflect the epistemological assumptions of Global North education systems.

This transfer is not neutral (Alexander 2001; Alexander 2008; Steiner-Khamsi 2013). Although reforms are frequently framed as evidence-based or globally validated, their adoption may be shaped as much by political pressure, funding structures, and international legitimacy as by local demand or demonstrated effectiveness (Qargha 2025). When imported reforms misalign with local institutional realities, cultural expectations, or classroom practice, systems may respond through partial implementation, symbolic compliance, or quiet

resistance. Tabulawa (2013), drawing on Hoyle's concept of "tissue rejection," describes how reforms may be formally adopted but only superficially enacted when they do not fit the underlying context; Steiner-Khamsi (2010; 2012) describes related dynamics as "double-talk" and "policy bilingualism".

1.3 How teachers interpret and enact pedagogical reforms in classrooms

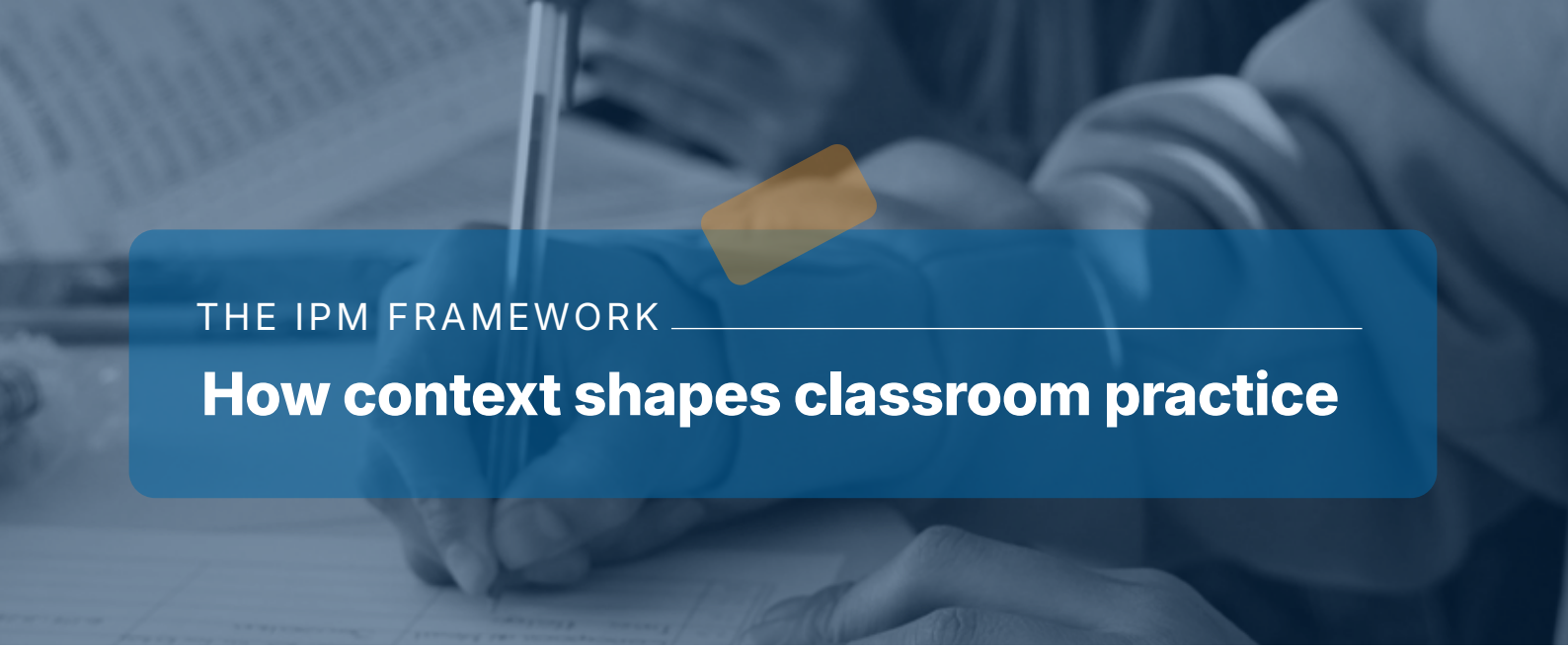
This report synthesizes evidence from the Egypt, India, and Mexico country studies through the analytical lens of Invisible Pedagogical Mindsets (IPMs).[1] The IPM framework was also the shared analytical lens used within each country study. Each team applied the IPM framework in structured data collection, codebook development, and thematic analysis (Ferreyra et al. 2026; Moustafa et al. 2026; Ravindranath et al. 2026).

The synthesis addresses three questions:

1. How do culture, existing educational ecosystems, and teachers' preferred learning theories shape pedagogical reforms across the three country cases?
2. What broader lessons across the three cases emerge about the role of Invisible Pedagogical Mindsets (IPMs) in shaping reform implementation?
3. What does an IPM-aware approach imply for the design, implementation, and scaling of reforms?

The synthesis demonstrates that IPMs function as a critical translation mechanism, building on earlier work on teacher sensemaking, culture, and policy-practice gaps, while offering a practical framework for system leaders (Alexander 2008; Coburn 2001; Schweisfurth 2013; Tabulawa 2013). Section 2 introduces the IPM framework used throughout this report.

[1] *The SPARKS Working Papers provide the conceptual and empirical foundations for this synthesis. Working Paper I reconceptualized pedagogy as the interaction among culture, educational ecosystems, and learning theories—moving beyond viewing it as a set of neutral teaching techniques. Working Paper II empirically demonstrated that generalized student-centered reforms fail when they ignore Invisible Pedagogical Mindsets, showing how policy transfer operates along a continuum from voluntary lesson-drawing to indirect coercion. Working Paper III outlined collaborative research approaches to surface how invisible categories shape pedagogical choices in specific contexts. The IPM framework emerged from this body of work to address a longstanding gap identified since the 1990s: although research consistently shows that pedagogical reforms rarely transfer intact across contexts, global education discourse continues to promote student-centered approaches as universally applicable "best practices" (Qargha and Dyl, 2024a, b, and c).*



THE IPM FRAMEWORK

How context shapes classroom practice

Teachers do not respond to policies only as written; they respond to how those reforms are interpreted in relation to what feels legitimate, feasible, and worthwhile in their classrooms. The Invisible Pedagogical Mindsets (IPMs) framework captures this interpretive process. IPMs are not formal positions teachers consciously adopt, but patterned dispositions shaped by professional backgrounds, cultural contexts, and accumulated experiences. In this report, IPMs are understood as the interaction of three categories that shape pedagogical choices: education ecosystems, culture, and learning theories.

2.1 From coherent systems on paper to lived classroom reality

Existing work on system coherence shows that reforms are more likely to affect learning when key parts of an education system, such as curriculum, assessment, accountability, financing, and support, are aligned around the reform efforts (Kaffenberger and Spivack 2022; Pritchett 2015). This report builds on this insight, but focuses on a different layer: how teachers experience and interpret those signals in daily classroom practice.

Alignment across formal system elements is necessary, but not sufficient. Education systems cannot be understood solely as technical systems that require better calibration. They are also political and cultural spaces shaped by multiple actors, competing priorities, and institutional histories (Honig and Hatch 2004; Pritchett et al. 2013). For reforms to lead to lasting changes in classroom practice, they must be both technically coherent and fit the lived realities of teachers and schools. The SPARKS project examines how reforms are experienced and interpreted by teachers in the classroom, where policy signals meet cultural expectations, constraints of the education ecosystem, and teachers' beliefs about how students learn.

2.2 Three interconnected categories that shape teaching

Understanding classroom practice requires examining how teachers interpret and enact reforms. The IPM framework describes this interpretive process in terms of three interconnected categories that shape teaching: education ecosystems, culture, and learning theories (see IPM graphic).

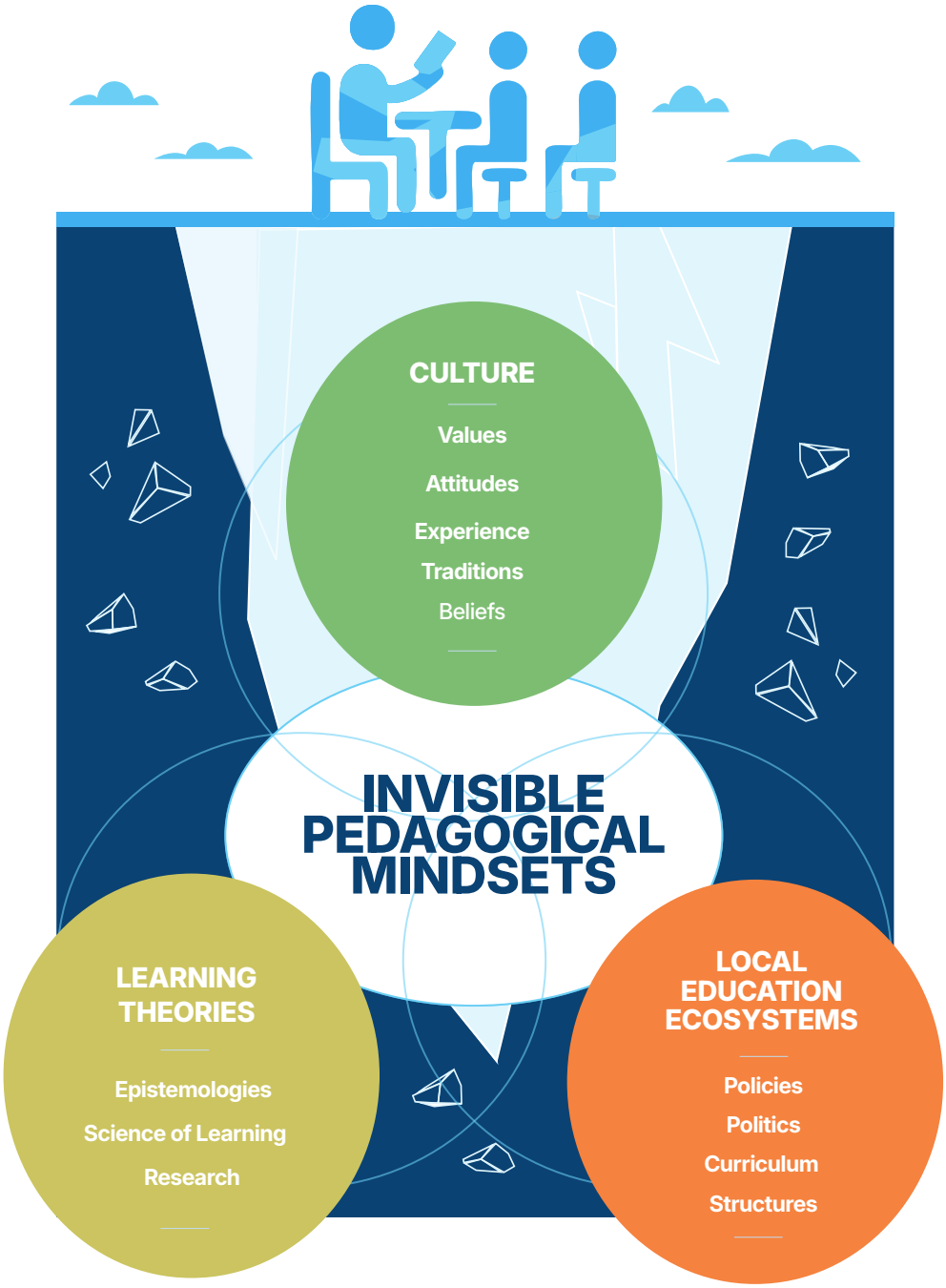


Figure 1 - The IPM framework

Education ecosystems are the concrete conditions in which teachers encounter system priorities in daily practice, such as curricula and assessments, materials, time and workload, professional development, administrative routines, and support. These conditions shape what teachers understand the system to value, and what they see as possible in their classrooms.

Culture refers to the shared beliefs, values, norms, practices, and historically shaped interpretations that communities use to make sense of the world. These include how they understand authority and relationships, what they expect schooling to accomplish, and the roles they assign to teachers and students (Alexander 2008; Tabulawa 2013). In classrooms, culture filters how reforms are interpreted, which expectations about teaching and learning are taken for granted, and which pedagogical approaches are seen as appropriate or out of place.

Learning theories refer to teachers' beliefs about how knowledge is created, acquired, and taught. These beliefs are shaped by teachers' own schooling, training, and professional experience, and they are often implicit. These beliefs surface most visibly when a reform asks teachers to teach in ways that feel unfamiliar or misaligned with what they believe students need in order to learn.

These three categories interact rather than operate separately. Ecosystem conditions shape what is feasible; cultural expectations shape what is appropriate; and learning theories shape what teachers regard as effective. Sometimes these categories reinforce a reform. At other times, they may pull in different directions, requiring teachers to adapt, reinterpret, or selectively enact reform messages.

2.3 Why the same reform works differently

Taken together, the three IPM categories explain why similar reform language can produce different classroom practices. Policy signals do not move directly into practice. Teachers encounter those signals within educational ecosystems and interpret them in light of cultural expectations and beliefs about learning. Classroom practice emerges from this layered interpretive process.

For policymakers, the IPM lens offers a practical way to anticipate how reforms will be translated in classrooms. It does not replace system coherence analysis; rather, it complements it by showing how teachers interpret system signals through their cultural contexts, working conditions, and beliefs about learning.

THREE REFORMS, THREE CONTEXTS

Research design and methods

Because the full country reports are published online, this section summarizes only the shared research design and the key contextual features needed for comparison. This synthesis draws directly on the three country reports, using the IPM framework to understand how culture, ecosystems, and learning theories shape the implementation of reforms in each context.

3.1 Why Egypt, India, and Mexico?

Egypt, India, and Mexico were selected as SPARKS country sites through a structured process focused on identifying contexts in which Research Policy Collaboratives could realistically be established and sustained. The core criteria were the presence of a facilitating partner organization that had expressed clear interest in joining SPARKS, demonstrated strong research capacity, held credibility with government and civil society, and was committed to trust-based, co-produced research. Active national pedagogical reforms were also an essential consideration: Education 2.0 (2018) in Egypt, NEP 2020 in India, and the Nueva Escuela Mexicana (2019) in Mexico all sought to change everyday classroom practice, making these countries directly relevant for examining how Invisible Pedagogical Mindsets shape reform implementation (Ministry of Education and Technical Education 2018; Ministry of Human Resource Development 2020; Secretaría de Educación Pública 2019).

Once the RPCs were in place, the three cases also proved analytically useful for comparative work. They differ in governance arrangements and cultural and institutional histories, including the balance between central and subnational authority, the relationships between schools and communities, and traditions of teacher authority. These three cases do not represent all contexts where IPMs

shape reform. They were purposively chosen because SPARKS could partner with local organizations to generate comparable mixed-methods evidence on IPMs linked to real-time national reform processes, and together they provide diverse points of comparison for how similar reform ambitions play out under different conditions. The brief country summaries below are not intended to replace the full country reports; rather, they provide the minimum reform and study-site context needed to interpret the cross-country synthesis that follows.

All three reforms share a broad commitment to moving beyond rote instruction toward more active, student-centered, and competency-based teaching practice, yet they unfold in distinct institutional settings. Egypt's reform has evolved through shifting national priorities and school models; India's reform is a national policy interpreted across diverse state systems; and Mexico's reform is being implemented across a federal system shaped by strong regional and cultural variation.

Egypt's Education 2.0, launched in 2018, seeks to shift from exam-focused, rote instruction to a competency-based, student-centered approach that prepares students for knowledge-based inquiry and lifelong learning. The reform was structured around five main pillars: a new multidisciplinary curriculum, technology integration in teaching and teacher professional development, teacher and school leadership development, infrastructure and access improvements, and improved assessment practices. Since 2018, however, the reform's focus and framing have evolved. It is now more commonly referred to as "the new system," and current priorities focus on structural issues, including overcrowded classrooms, insufficient infrastructure, and revisions to early-grade assessment practices. The Egypt report analyzes how culture, school conditions, and teacher beliefs shape implementation in Arabic-language classrooms in public and community schools, and how teachers experience the gap between reform expectations and everyday practice (Moustafa et al. 2026).

India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is a comprehensive vision to reform the governance and regulatory structures of India's education system while aligning education with 21st-century learning goals, Sustainable Development Goal 4, and Indian values and education traditions. Pedagogically, NEP 2020 aims to move away from rote learning toward classroom practices that nurture creativity, foundational literacy and numeracy, holistic and experiential learning,

critical thinking, socio-emotional development, multilingual pedagogy, and expanded teacher preparation. Because implementation of NEP 2020 depends on coordinated efforts between national and state levels, the India report examines how teachers experience NEP 2020's pedagogical vision in four states: Uttarakhand, Jharkhand, Telangana, and Goa. The report highlights how teachers' cultural commitments, working conditions, and beliefs about learning shape the translation of NEP 2020's student-centered vision into classroom practice (Ravindranath et al. 2026).

Mexico's Nueva Escuela Mexicana (NEM), launched in 2019, aims to move Mexico's education system away from rote instruction toward a more inclusive, competency-based, and student-centered model. NEM promotes active and intercultural pedagogies, with an emphasis on inclusion, social participation, and respect for cultural and linguistic diversity. This reform unfolds in a country whose 32 federal entities reflect deep regional, cultural, and institutional diversity, where a pedagogical approach appropriate for one entity might not translate effectively to another. The Mexico report examines the implementation of NEM in two public primary schools: one in Mexico City, the economic and political capital of Mexico, and one in Yucatán, a context shaped by relative geographic isolation and strong Indigenous and regional identities. Together, these sites show how culture, school conditions, and learning theories mediate the use of active pedagogies and the reform's reception among teachers and families (Ferreyra et al. 2026).

3.2 Research policy collaboratives: Methodology as theory of change

The SPARKS project established Research Policy Collaboratives (RPCs). RPCs were locally led collaborative research hubs that brought together teachers, school leaders, district officials, policymakers, researchers, NGOs, youth, and families. Their purpose was to bring the perspectives of those who enact and experience reform into the research process itself—shaping questions, co-designing methods, interpreting findings, and translating results into policy-relevant recommendations. Led by the Foundation for Self-Discovery and Development (Egypt), Dream a Dream (India), and Educación para Compartir/Education for Sharing (Mexico), the RPCs met regularly to set research priorities, co-design methods, interpret findings, and plan how to communicate results. This structure was especially important because each country study examined reforms already underway, rather than externally designed interventions introduced for research purposes.

This collaborative approach reflects a simple theory of change: to understand how reforms work in practice, those who enact and experience them must help shape the research. The joint inquiry surfaced contextual nuances, built ownership, and generated more actionable findings for those responsible for change.

3.3 Data sources and cross-country synthesis process

Between 2023 and 2025, each RPC conducted a mixed-methods country study. The research design and analysis were led by the Brookings team in partnership with local facilitating organizations. RPC members, including teachers, policymakers, and community representatives, actively shaped research questions, reviewed emerging findings, and informed policy recommendations.

Across the three SPARKS sites, data collection combined semi-structured interviews and focus groups, targeted surveys, classroom observations, arts-based workshops, and document analysis (Ferreyra et al. 2026; Moustafa et al. 2026; Ravindranath et al. 2026). Because the RPCs were locally led, each country team adapted the shared research design to its context, research priorities, and feasible data-collection strategy. As a result, not every method was used in every country. Table 1 summarizes the data sources across the three country studies.

Country	Interviews and focus groups	Targeted surveys	Other data sources
Egypt	7 national policy actors and 9 teachers engaged across three iterative interview rounds	27 teachers	Arts-based workshops with 14 teachers; document analysis of core policy texts, teacher training materials, and curricula
India	65 teachers, 5 teacher educators, and 5 national policy actors	Not conducted	Document analysis of core policy texts, teacher training materials, and curricula
Mexico	22 teachers, 81 parents, and 20 students	17 teachers, 5 principals, 5 support staff, and 72 parents	Small-scale classroom observations and joint documentation involving 12 students; document analysis of core policy texts, teacher training materials, and curricula

Each country team analyzed its data using thematic analysis guided by a shared IPM codebook developed collaboratively across the three SPARKS projects. Brookings prepared an initial draft, which the country teams reviewed, revised, and finalized through virtual meetings and the in-person research exchange in Egypt. The codebook organized codes under the three IPM categories: culture, education ecosystem, and learning theories. Each code had subcodes for topics such as policy implementation, assessment practices, pedagogical approaches, and teacher professional development. Interview and focus group transcripts were coded using a combination of manual review and, in some cases, AI-assisted first-pass coding that was subsequently verified by human researchers. Survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. This shared analytical framework enabled cross-country synthesis. The findings presented in Section 4 reflect patterns that emerged consistently across country-level analyses conducted by different teams in different languages and contexts, using the same underlying conceptual categories. The codebook is available in the annexes of each country report.

WHAT THREE COUNTRIES REVEAL

IPMs in action across Egypt, India, and Mexico

This section shows how the three IPM categories shape what reforms mean for teachers and what they can realistically do in their classrooms. The evidence from Egypt, India, and Mexico reveals two distinct phenomena: how IPMs produce variation in the enactment of reforms across contexts and how they can contribute to reforms stalling or remaining symbolic when those contexts are ignored. These are related but not identical findings. Understanding both is essential for policymakers who want to enact reforms that adapt constructively to local realities rather than ones that morph into surface compliance. It is also worth noting at the outset that teachers in these three studies are not obstacles to reform. They are frontline interpreters doing professional work under real constraints. The IPM lens is not a tool for identifying teachers who need to be overridden. It is a tool for designing reforms that work with teachers' capacities and contexts.

Sections 4.1 through 4.4 show how the three IPM categories operate in practice; taken together, they illustrate the classroom-level dynamics that system coherence analysis alone cannot capture, not because coherence does not matter, but because IPMs shape how teachers receive and interpret even well-aligned signals. It is worth noting that the education ecosystem category includes structural conditions such as assessment systems, workload, materials, and professional development, which are barriers to implementation in any context. What makes them part of the IPM framework is that they are the channel through which system-level signals reach teachers, and teachers' interpretations of those signals are shaped by culture and learning theories. Structural constraints and interpretive dispositions are analytically distinct but practically inseparable.

4.1 Culture: How teachers understand their role

Teaching as moral and relational work: A cross-country pattern

Across all three country studies, the most consistent pattern was how teachers' descriptions of their professional role were strongly moral and relational in orientation. Teachers understood their work as being about character formation, community responsibility, and care, not only about curriculum delivery. In Egypt, Arabic-language teachers described themselves as custodians of language, culture, and national identity, emphasizing their responsibility to serve as moral examples and "positive models" for students (Moustafa et al. 2026). In India, teachers across four states described education as the cultivation of character and dignity as much as intellect (Ravindranath et al. 2026). In Mexico, teachers framed their work as fostering collective responsibility and social transformation, noting that connecting lessons to students' lived experiences sparked engagement and pride (Ferreyra et al. 2026). The specific forms this moral orientation takes differ across cultural contexts, but the pattern of teachers seeing their work as fundamentally about human flourishing, and not only academic instruction, was consistent and strong.

This cultural understanding aligns with reform rhetoric on care, inclusion, and holistic development, but also creates tension. When teachers see themselves primarily as moral guides and authority figures, they may struggle with reforms that emphasize student autonomy, co-construction of knowledge, and more horizontal teacher-student relationships.

In Mexico, for example, teachers strongly supported NEM's emphasis on community and inclusion, yet even supportive teachers found it difficult to enact the reform's call for autonomy. They "had been trained to obey vertical structures" and wanted more concrete guidance, describing themselves as waiting for "step-by-step recipes" rather than exercising independent judgment. Cultural expectations about authority shaped how autonomy was interpreted (Ferreyra et al. 2026).

Social hierarchies shape participation

Cultural norms around gender, language, caste, and class also structure how students participate in "student-centered" classrooms. In India, teachers reported that boys speak more in class while girls quietly complete their work, reflecting expectations that "girls should be quiet and sincere." Teachers recognized these patterns but had little training or support to change them.

Language hierarchies create similar challenges. NEP 2020 promotes multilingual and mother-tongue education, but classroom practice is complicated by the high status of English and dominant regional languages, as well as the marginalization of minority languages. Teachers described improvising multilingual strategies without adequate materials or training.

In Mexico, NEM promotes intercultural and bilingual education, and students expressed enthusiasm for learning Indigenous languages such as Maya. Yet teachers felt unprepared to teach in languages they did not speak fluently, and many families were no longer transmitting these languages at home. Policy ambitions around language require ecosystem support, including materials, training, and time, not just new discourse.

In Egypt, expectations about discipline and respect for authority shaped how teachers implemented group work and discussion. Teachers described tension between reforms promoting collaborative, student-directed learning and norms that position teachers as authority figures whose main role is to maintain order and impart knowledge. Small adaptations, such as brief peer discussions and providing locally based examples, represented meaningful cultural negotiation, even if they looked modest from the outside.

Openness to change on local terms

Across countries, teachers and families were open to new approaches when they saw local relevance and received adequate support. For example, Indian teachers embraced the NEP 2020's focus on holistic development and social-emotional learning, and noted the reforms' alignment with their own values, even as they struggled with practical constraints.

The pattern across all three countries is clear: Culture does not doom reform, but it shapes what reforms mean and how they are enacted (Alexander 2001, 2008; Tabulawa 2013; Schweisfurth 2013). For policymakers, this implies that transformation requires engaging with cultural values, including teachers' moral identities and community expectations, rather than assuming that importing new pedagogical models will automatically change practice.

4.2 Education ecosystems: What makes reform feasible

If culture shapes the meaning of reform, education ecosystems determine whether new approaches are feasible. Cross-country evidence points to several recurring ecosystem constraints that undermine reform, even where there is cultural receptivity (Tabulawa 2013; Schweisfurth 2013; Westbrook et al. 2013).

Assessment-pedagogy misalignment

One of the most consistently documented contradictions across all three country studies is the mismatch between assessment systems and pedagogical reforms. All three countries have introduced policies emphasizing critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving, and competency-based learning. However, assessment systems continue to reward rote memorization and content recall.

Quantitative evidence from the RISE Programme corroborates this qualitative pattern. Using Surveys of Enacted Curriculum in Tanzania and Uganda, researchers have documented systematic misalignment between prescribed curriculum, high-stakes assessments, and actual teacher practice. This research shows how misalignment across instructional components shapes what teachers do in classrooms (Atuhurra and Kaffenberger 2022). The SPARKS evidence adds a qualitative dimension to this finding, showing not only that misalignment exists but also how teachers experience and navigate it in specific cultural and institutional contexts.

In Egypt, despite Education 2.0's emphasis on skills and multidisciplinary learning, inspectors still reward adherence to scripted lessons and orderly classrooms rather than student engagement or creative facilitation. Teachers receive mixed messages: training encourages innovation, but accountability systems punish deviation.

In Mexico, eliminating standardized tests as the main accountability tool initially created confusion rather than space for innovation (Ferreyra et al. 2026). Teachers worried about assessing learning without clear benchmarks and about potential negative effects on foundational skills.

For policymakers, aligning high-stakes assessment with pedagogical goals is a non-negotiable condition for sustained change. Assessment misalignment is a failure of system coherence. However, how teachers navigate that misalignment, whether by selectively enacting reform language, prioritizing examination preparation, or quietly resisting inspection expectations, is shaped by the cultural and learning-theory dimensions of their IPMs.

Professional development that misses classroom reality

All three countries invested heavily in professional development as a primary reform lever, but much of the training did not translate into practice because it remained disconnected from teachers' realities.

In India, pre-service training was described as "overly theoretical" and focused on "ideal schools" that did not resemble actual working conditions, with few opportunities for practice, feedback, and follow-up. In-service programs like the National Initiative for School Heads and Teachers' Holistic Advancement, known as NISHTHA, were considered more helpful because they were grounded in teachers' and students' experiences and practical application.

In Egypt, training for Education 2.0 focused on explaining new curriculum content and digital platforms, but gave limited opportunities for teachers to experience student-centered methods as learners themselves. In Mexico, some state-level programs modeled experiential, reflective approaches and were positively received, but system-wide training during NEM rollout was rushed and uneven, leaving many teachers "still trying to figure out how to implement all of this."

One-off workshops rarely shift practice. Effective professional development requires sustained, practice-based learning, peer collaboration, and coaching (Darling-Hammond et al. 2017; Popova et al. 2019). Evidence from LMIC contexts also suggests that professional development is most effective when structured pedagogical approaches are modeled in training, not to eliminate teacher judgment, but to make the reform's vision concrete and accessible, giving teachers practical tools they can adapt rather than abstract principles they must operationalize alone (Popova et al. 2022). The three country studies add an important qualitative dimension to this well-established finding. When training is disconnected from teachers' cultural context and working theories of learning, as it was in Egypt, India, and Mexico, it is not merely ineffective. It can also deepen the gap between reform rhetoric and classroom reality, because it asks teachers to change their practice without engaging the IPMs that shape it.

Time, tasks, and administrative overload

A recurring finding, especially in India, is that non-teaching duties consume time that teachers need for instruction, planning, and professional learning. Teachers reported responsibilities for election monitoring, survey data collection, compliance

reporting, midday meal oversight, and other tasks that pull them away from teaching. NEP 2020 commits to reducing administrative burden, but structural changes have been limited so far, according to teachers.

For policymakers, the implication is straightforward: Administrative overload is not a marginal issue. It directly undermines reform by crowding out the work that actually improves teaching and learning.

Resources and infrastructure

Active, project-based, and inquiry-driven pedagogies require materials, space, time, and flexibility. In many schools, these are in short supply.

In Mexico, teachers and families explained how textbook design and quality issues, including light print, inaccessible font sizes, limited large-print options, and weak alignment with inquiry-based learning, undermined rather than supported NEM. Large class sizes and inadequate materials in India and Egypt made it difficult to facilitate small-group work, provide individual feedback, or implement projects. In Egypt, uneven access to tablets and unreliable connectivity created disparities in digital learning opportunities.

These resource gaps are not evenly distributed. Schools serving advantaged communities often supplement public funding, while schools serving marginalized populations cannot. For development partners and ministries, this highlights the need to match pedagogical ambition with realistic investments in basic infrastructure and materials, particularly in underserved areas.

Middle-tier actors as key interpreters

Across contexts, middle-tier actors, including district officials, supervisors, inspectors, and instructional coaches, are key in shaping ecosystem conditions. By deciding how to monitor, set professional development agendas, and interpret reform language, they effectively set the standards for "good implementation" in day-to-day work.

In Egypt, supervisors enforcing strict lesson scripts signaled that adherence to prescribed routines mattered more than implementing new student-centered approaches, thereby undermining messages about teacher creativity. In India, district-level institutions varied widely in quality and responsiveness, so teachers in neighboring blocks received very different guidance and follow-up on the same

reform. In Mexico, uneven state-level capacity led to differing reform experiences for teachers in adjacent regions, as some state teams prioritized classroom support while others focused primarily on compliance.

For policymakers, this underscores that strengthening middle-tier capacity and alignment is essential for scaling reforms that maintain core principles while adapting to local context (Olsen and Wyss 2025). Across the three countries, middle-tier actors serve as the primary site where system-level signals and teacher-level IPMs collide: In Egypt, supervisors enforced compliance; in India, district-level variability meant that neighboring teachers received fundamentally different guidance; in Mexico, state-level divergence in capacity led to uneven reform experiences across regions. The pattern reflects the degree to which middle-tier actors have themselves internalized the reform's goals or remain oriented toward monitoring compliance.

4.3 Learning theories: How teachers blend approaches

The third IPM category highlights how teachers' beliefs about knowledge, learning, and pedagogy shape their response to reforms. Evidence from all three countries challenges simplistic narratives portraying teachers as defenders of "traditional" methods against "progressive" reforms.

Teachers as pragmatic professional eclectics

Teachers across all three countries draw from multiple pedagogical traditions—transmission and construction, local and global, structured and open-ended—based on content, student needs, resources, and time. In India, one teacher emphasized that "activity-based teaching" must be grounded in students' context and language. In Mexico's Indigenous education schools, teachers built on communal learning practices and experienced NEM's project-based approaches as a natural extension of existing methods; in mainstream schools, teachers adopted selected elements more cautiously, combining them with familiar practices. In Egypt, teachers blended storytelling, local examples, and group discussion with lecture and recitation for Arabic.

For policymakers, this means reforms should not demand a single "correct" pedagogical model. Reforms work better when they help teachers articulate their existing theories, reflect on what works, and thoughtfully integrate new approaches—rather than presenting one method as universally superior.

Authority, autonomy, and cultural context

As Section 4.1 showed, teachers across all three countries understand their role as moral guides. Reforms that promote student agency must work within this reality, not against it.

In practice, teachers often reconcile these demands through gradual scaffolding, building trust and safety first and slowly increasing student independence. Across Egypt, India, and Mexico, teachers who blended transmission and constructivist approaches were not failing to implement the reform. They were exercising professional judgment that the three country studies consistently document: that how students learn is not a question with a single correct answer, and that sustainable pedagogical change must build on, rather than override, the learning theories teachers bring to their classrooms. These patterns confirm the argument developed in Section 2—making reforms more coherent at the system level creates better conditions for teachers' professional judgment to support reform goals, but it does not, and cannot, remove the interpretive work that teachers do as they reconcile cultural expectations, ecosystem constraints, and their own beliefs about how students learn. This approach maintains the teacher as anchor while creating more room for student voice and initiative. Reforms that expect immediate, radical shifts in classroom power dynamics, without allowing time for teachers to build new practices, are less likely to gain traction.

4.4 Where the three cases diverge: What differences teach us

The cross-country patterns documented in Sections 4.1 through 4.3 are real and analytically important. But they risk giving the impression that IPMs operate identically across all contexts. In practice, the three country studies also reveal meaningful differences in how reform authority is experienced, how communities relate to reform, how language and culture interact with pedagogy, and how accountability shapes classroom behavior. These differences matter because they complicate generalizations and point to context-specific policy levers.

Reform authority and teacher agency

In Egypt and India, the primary constraint on teacher agency was institutional cultures that enforced compliance, with little pedagogical autonomy for teachers in policy documents. In Mexico, the situation was reversed. NEM explicitly granted teachers pedagogical autonomy, but teachers had been trained to follow hierarchical instruction and experienced autonomy as uncertainty rather than empowerment. In Egypt, teachers "woke up to a new curriculum and were simply told to accept it." In Mexico, teachers were "waiting for step-by-step recipes" despite having been formally given the authority to decide. The problem in both cases is a mismatch between the role the system assigns teachers and the professional conditions it provides. However, the direction of the mismatch differs. Responding to it requires different interventions: stronger voice mechanisms in Egypt and India and more intensive professional support for autonomous practice in Mexico.

Family and community engagement

Mexico's NEM was designed with family and community co-ownership as a central principle, and evidence from both study sites confirms that families responded positively, often trusting the reform even before fully understanding it. Students in Yucatán reported stronger motivation and engagement when community knowledge was incorporated into lessons. In India, teacher-community relationships were highly valued but informally maintained. The system did not support or recognize these relationships. In Egypt, the study design foregrounded teacher-institutional dynamics over family engagement, reflecting a context in which reform ownership was contested primarily at the school and ministry levels rather than at the community level. These differences suggest that community participation is not a universal reform lever. In places where it already exists culturally, as in Mexico, it can be built upon. However, in places where this involvement is not as strong, it requires deliberate institutional investment to build relational trust and a shared vision among families, schools, and communities (Morris et al. 2024; Winthrop et al. 2021).

Language, culture, and pedagogical identity

All three countries reflect cultural dimensions of IPMs, but the form those dimensions take differs substantially. In Egypt, Arabic teachers experienced the reform as a threat to their custodial role as guardians of language, national identity, and cultural continuity. This was a unique role that Arabic teachers felt was not shared in the same way by teachers in other subjects. In India, the multilingual policy landscape was complex: dominant language hierarchies meant that teachers improvised multilingual pedagogical strategies without materials or training, even as policy promoted mother-tongue instruction. In Mexico, the NEM's intercultural commitment resonated strongly with teachers in Indigenous education schools, where community knowledge was already integrated into pedagogy. In Mexico City, intercultural pedagogy was accepted in principle but constrained by teachers' own linguistic abilities. These divergences confirm that "culturally responsive reform" cannot be operationalized through a single approach. What it means to work with cultural context varies in substance across the three cases.

Accountability and its removal

A particularly instructive divergence concerns how teachers responded to accountability structures. In Egypt, a rigid inspection system penalized innovation and rewarded scripted compliance. In India, the primary accountability problem was not rigidity but overextension—non-teaching administrative duties consumed the time teachers needed for pedagogical work. In Mexico, the deliberate removal of high-stakes national examinations was intended to open space for authentic teaching. However, without clear alternative benchmarks, teachers shared that they experienced confusion and anxiety about assessment rather than liberation. Taken together, these three patterns suggest that neither strict accountability nor its absence reliably supports pedagogical change. The character and coherence of accountability, whether it aligns with the reform's pedagogical goals, whether it communicates clear expectations, and whether it leaves time and space for teacher judgment, matters more than its presence or intensity.

These divergences do not undermine the cross-country patterns identified in Sections 4.1 through 4.3. They refine them. Understanding how IPMs operate in a specific context requires attending not only to the similarities that make comparison possible, but to the differences that reveal the specific conditions under which reform can take root.

Power, equity, and the limits of the IPM lens

The cross-country findings show how IPMs shape the implementation of reforms. Before turning to implications, we must also consider who has power and whose experiences shape reform, as well as the limits of what the IPM framework can and cannot explain.

5.1 Power, equity, and whose experiences matter

Reforms designed by international organizations and national policymakers often embody assumptions about learning, development, and pedagogy (Chisholm and Steiner-Khamsi 2009; Steiner-Khamsi 2013; Tikly 2011). When these assumptions conflict with local IPMs, reforms risk reproducing inequality instead of transforming it.

Mexico's experience with Indigenous languages illustrates this tension. NEM's commitment to intercultural pedagogy and bilingual education acknowledges Indigenous knowledge systems. However, without sufficient materials, teacher preparation, and institutional support, the policy may remain largely symbolic (Ferreyra et al. 2026; Hamel 2008).

India's caste and gender dynamics show similar patterns. Policies that promote student voice and inclusive classrooms must confront longstanding expectations about whose knowledge and participation are valued. If these dynamics are not addressed in teacher education, school leadership, and accountability structures, reforms can leave underlying inequities still intact (Jha and Kelleher 2006; Ravindranath et al. 2026).

For policymakers, the IPM lens highlights that power and equity are not add-ons. They are built into the experiences that shape reform design, the practices that are treated as "best," and the practices expected to change. Attending to IPMs helps identify where deeper participation and the redistribution of voice are needed for reforms to be both effective and just.

5.2 What IPMs do, and do not, explain

The IPM framework is a powerful way to understand how reforms are interpreted and enacted in classrooms, but it is not a complete theory of system change. It does not directly account for:

- Macro-level political economy (fiscal capacity, debt, competing spending priorities).
- Long-term infrastructure investments (school buildings, transport, connectivity).
- Labor market structures (status of the teaching profession, career pathways, pay).
- Historical legacies (colonial education models, past reforms, trust or fatigue).

These factors matter greatly for what is possible in any system (Kingdon and Muzammil 2013; Pritchett et al. 2013). In this report, IPMs are used as a practical bridge between high-level system analysis and classroom practice, not as a replacement for political and economic analysis.

For example, resource scarcity shapes ecosystem conditions, such as large class sizes and limited materials, which in turn influence teachers' beliefs about which pedagogies are feasible. The value of IPMs for policymakers lies in their ability to bridge system-level structures and classroom-level practice. They make visible the translation process through which policies become—or fail to become—lived pedagogical reality, and they help identify leverage points where reform design, support, and communication can be adjusted to work with, rather than against, the mindsets that shape teaching.

What system leaders can do differently

The cross-country findings suggest three major shifts for national and international policymakers, system leaders, and development partners: design reforms for translation rather than transfer, align ecosystems before scaling new pedagogies, and invest in professional learning and co-design that work with teachers' mindsets rather than against them (Crouch and DeStefano 2017; OECD 2021; Olsen and Wyss 2025).

6.1 Design for translation, not transfer

Policy debates often distinguish between coercive and voluntary transfer of reforms (Steiner-Khamsi 2025). The SPARKS evidence suggests a more practical distinction: whether local actors have real institutional capacity, time, and professional legitimacy to interpret and adapt reforms, and whether those adaptations are recognized as legitimate.

In all three countries, teachers adopted, adapted, or quietly resisted elements of reform depending on how well they fit cultural norms, ecosystems, and learning theories.

For system transformation, the implication is not to aim for mechanical transfer of reform designs, but to build in structures that support and guide this interpretive work from the outset. This means designing reforms so they can be translated into diverse contexts, keeping the IPMs in mind, rather than copied wholesale.

This process entails:

Pre-implementation IPM analysis

Before adopting or adapting reforms, systematically examine cultural values, existing ecosystem conditions, and prevalent learning theories with teachers, families, and communities. Use this analysis to anticipate friction points and adjust the reform design, materials, and support so that they connect with the IPMs that shape classroom practice.

Piloting with documented adaptation

Pilot reforms in different contexts and deliberately document how teachers and communities adapt them. Integrate adaptations that demonstrably improve teacher uptake or student engagement into the scaled design, rather than insisting on uniform fidelity that ignores what pilots revealed.

Legitimizing adaptation

Make it explicit in policy communication and guidance that thoughtful adaptation is expected and valued, and distinguish it clearly from changes that dilute core principles of the reform. Provide examples of both acceptable and unacceptable adaptations so teachers and middle-tier actors know what legitimate translation looks like in practice.

6.2 Align ecosystems before scaling new pedagogies

Across cases, the most common failure pattern was launching ambitious pedagogical reforms into ecosystems that still sent conflicting signals. Section 4 showed how misaligned assessments, materials, time use, and middle-tier practices repeatedly undercut reforms. The implication for reformers is to treat ecosystem alignment as a precondition, not an afterthought.

Key priorities include:

Assessment alignment

High-stakes assessments signal what the system really values. Assessment systems should be redesigned alongside pedagogical reforms so that they measure and reward the skills reforms seek to promote, including critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving, and competency-based learning. Promoting skills such as critical thinking while maintaining exams that reward memorization pushes teachers to ignore reform messages.

Materials and resources that match the vision

Textbooks, digital platforms, and other materials should make active, contextualized learning easier, not harder.

Time and administrative load

Reducing non-teaching administrative tasks and protecting time for planning, collaboration, and reflection are governance decisions, not technical details. Heavy reporting requirements directly displace classroom time and reform-related work.

Middle-tier alignment

Supervisors, district officials, and instructional coaches shape the daily conditions under which teachers work. Their incentives, training, and guidance must reinforce the same pedagogical principles signaled in policy, curriculum, and assessment.

Taken together, these steps ensure that when teachers do try to teach differently, the ecosystem does not push them back toward business-as-usual..

6.3 Make professional learning and Co-design central, not peripheral

The findings show that traditional, top-down professional development and reform design processes rarely shift practice in sustained ways. For reforms to take root, systems need to treat teachers and communities as co-designers and to invest in relational, practice-based professional learning.

Three priorities stand out:

Professional development that mirrors the pedagogy

One-off workshops and lectures about student-centered learning do not change how teachers teach. More effective approaches give teachers the chance to experience active, contextualized pedagogy themselves, practice with peers, receive feedback, and revisit new approaches over time. This requires sustained, planned investment rather than ad hoc training drives.

Structures for teacher collaboration and coaching

Teachers in all three countries valued learning from colleagues facing similar constraints and needed support to translate broad principles into concrete lessons. Systems can strengthen this by formalizing peer collaboration (for example, professional learning communities or lesson-study-style structures) and shifting supervisory roles toward instructional coaching rather than compliance checking.

Institutionalized co-design and feedback

The SPARKS Research Policy Collaborative model showed that when teachers, policymakers, and communities jointly examine implementation challenges, they generate insights that are more grounded and more likely to be used.

For policymakers and development partners, the overarching implication is that reforms succeed when they are designed with, not just for, teachers and communities (Sengeh and Winthrop 2022). The IPM lens underscores that sustainable change comes from aligning system signals, resources, and professional learning with how teachers make sense of their work.

CONCLUSION

From technical fixes to relational work

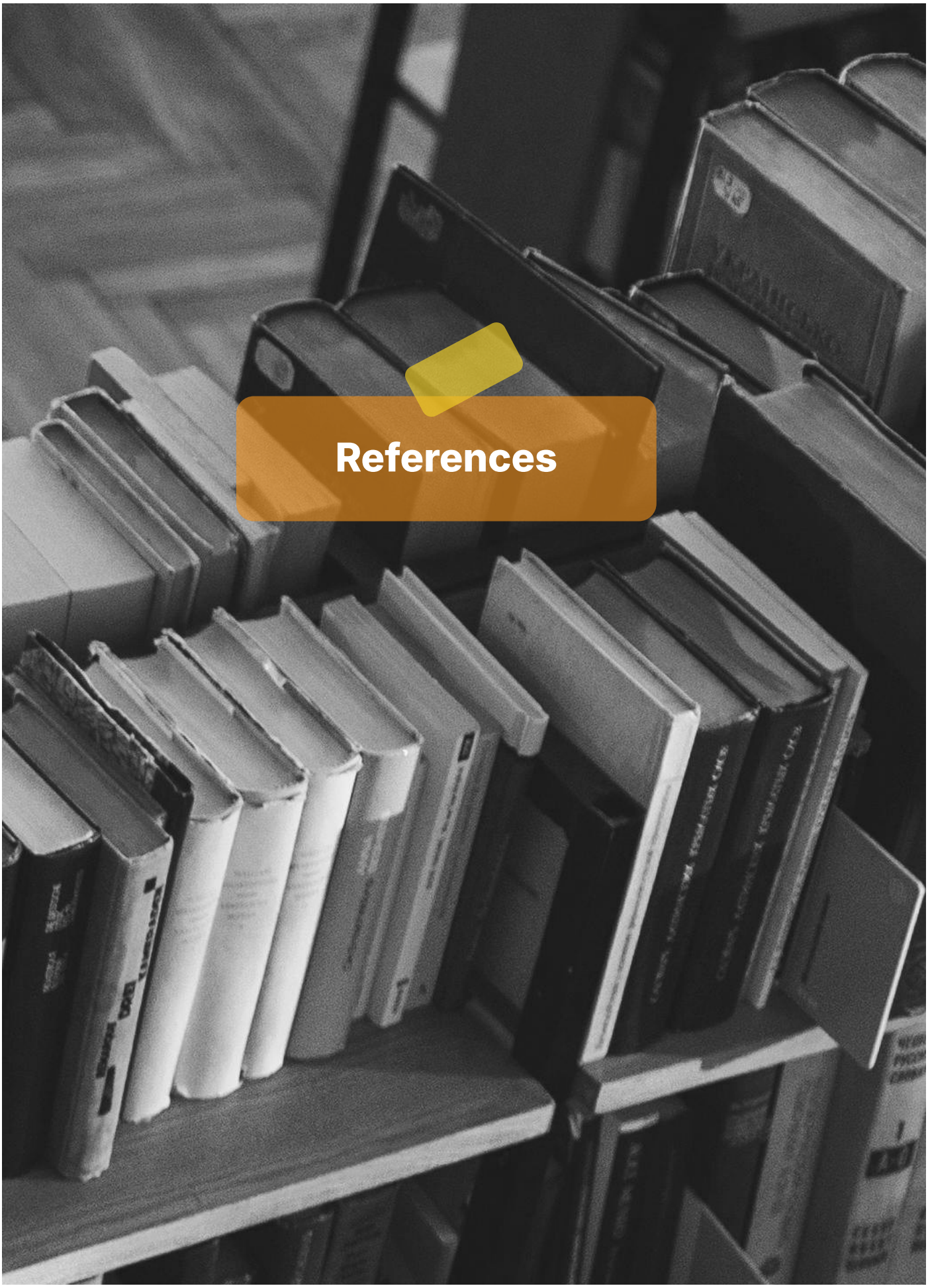
The experiences of Egypt, India, and Mexico show that pedagogical reform is not primarily a technical problem of importing better methods, but a relational one of how those methods align with teachers' purposes, constraints, and professional judgment. Invisible Pedagogical Mindsets help explain why reforms that look promising on paper are resisted, quietly adapted, or absorbed into business as usual—they collide with the culture, ecosystems, and learning theories that already shape classroom life. Across the three cases, teachers did not simply accept or reject the national reforms. They translated them through their cultural contexts, the constraints of their educational ecosystem, and their own understanding of what good teaching required.

These findings complement, rather than replace, system coherence analysis. Frameworks such as RISE help show why reforms are unlikely to change learning when policies, funding, information, support, and accountability send fragmented or contradictory signals. SPARKS adds a classroom-level layer to that diagnosis. It shows that even when reform goals are formally coherent, teachers still encounter them through local educational ecosystems, cultural expectations, and preferred learning theories. Coherence can reduce the friction that pushes teachers toward reactive workarounds, but it cannot eliminate the interpretive work teachers do as they turn policy into practice.

For system leaders, the IPM lens implies a different starting point. The question is not only whether formal system elements are aligned, but whether reforms are intelligible, legitimate, and feasible to the people expected to enact them. This requires asking how teachers, students, and communities understand what education is for; what good teaching looks like; and what their context makes possible. Designing with those understandings in view does not mean accepting all

existing practices; it means treating change as something to be negotiated with the people who will enact it (Morris et al. 2023).

The SPARKS work suggests that when teachers and communities are invited to interrogate their own purposes, working conditions, and theories of learning, co-design reforms, and test them against everyday realities, the distance between policy and practice can shrink in ways that are both more sustainable and more just. This requires system leaders and development partners to design for translation rather than transfer, align ecosystem conditions before scaling new pedagogies, and make professional learning and co-design central rather than peripheral. Moving from policy transfer to collaborative transformation requires patience and political will, but it offers a path to reforms that live not only in official documents, but in the daily interactions of classrooms.



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