

From Dependent Imitation To Independent Knowledge Creation: A Learning Independence Continuum For Classifying Learners Across Educational Levels

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Abstract:

Background: *Classifying learners is foundational for curriculum design, pedagogy, assessment and learner support, yet many learner labels are limited to age or grade and insufficiently connected to learner agency, support needs and evidence of learning.*

Materials and Methods: *This conceptual article used theory synthesis and model-building to integrate developmental, sociocultural, constructivist, experiential, self-regulated, competency-based, inclusive and higher education literature with selected policy frameworks on education levels, lifelong learning, digital education and learner agency.*

Results: *The proposed Learning Independence Continuum identifies six broad learner categories: early childhood learner, primary learner, secondary learner, TVET/college learner, undergraduate student and postgraduate scholar/researcher. Across these categories, dominant learning shifts from play, imitation and sensory exploration to guided foundational learning, subject-based inquiry, competency-oriented practical training, independent disciplinary study and original knowledge creation.*

Conclusion: *Learner classification should not merely label learners by institutional level; it should guide the alignment of pedagogy, learning resources, assessment evidence and learner support with developmental and educational expectations.*

Key Word: *learner classification; learning independence continuum; learner agency; competency-based education; TVET; self-regulated learning; postgraduate education; universal design for learning.*

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I. Introduction

Educational systems routinely use terms such as child, pupil, student, trainee and scholar to describe learners. These terms appear in curriculum documents, school administration, higher education regulations and everyday professional communication. However, they are often used without an explicit conceptual basis linking the learner label to dominant learning mode, educator role, degree of learner agency and evidence of learning. A clearer classification is necessary because learner labels influence expectations about dependence, responsibility, assessment, supervision, resource use and the learning environment.

The need for a coherent learner classification is especially important in systems that are adopting competency-based, inclusive, digital and lifelong learning approaches. Internationally, the International Standard Classification of Education provides a statistical structure for comparing levels of education across countries [26]. In Kenya, the Basic Education Curriculum Framework emphasizes nurturing every learner's potential through competencies, values and flexible pathways [12]. The TVET sector increasingly emphasizes competency-based education, training and assessment, while universities are guided by quality assurance standards for academic programmes, assessment and research supervision [7, 22].

Despite these policy developments, a practical gap remains between level-based classification and pedagogy-based classification. A learner in early childhood education, primary school, secondary school, TVET, undergraduate education and postgraduate education differs not only by age or institution but also by the nature of learning tasks, degree of self-direction, type of facilitator required, role of resources and expected evidence of learning. Young children may learn primarily through play, imitation, language and sensory interaction, whereas postgraduate scholars are expected to use literature, theory, methodology, analysis and ethical research practice to contribute to knowledge. Between these two points lie several stages of guided learning, subject inquiry, competency formation, disciplinary study and increasingly independent academic work.

This article therefore proposes a Learning Independence Continuum as a conceptual classification of learners across educational levels. The continuum does not assume that learners become independent in a

simple linear manner, nor does it imply that early learners lack agency. Rather, it recognizes that the form, intensity and purpose of support should change as learners gain language, social competence, cognitive tools, disciplinary knowledge, technical competence, self-regulation and research capacity. The framework is designed for educators, curriculum developers, teacher trainers, academic advisors, supervisors and policy actors who need a clear vocabulary for aligning learner categories with pedagogy, assessment and support. It contributes by integrating educational level, learner terminology, dominant learning mode, facilitator role, assessment evidence, learner agency and support needs into one pedagogical continuum.

Problem Statement

A common weakness in learner classification is the tendency to rely on institutional labels without specifying the pedagogical meaning of each label. For example, the terms child, pupil, student, trainee and scholar may be used interchangeably or inconsistently even though they imply different learning modes, learning activities, support structures and observable outcomes. Such imprecision can contribute to curriculum mismatch, inappropriate assessment, weak learner support and unclear educator roles.

There is therefore a need for a classification framework that is simple enough for professional use but sufficiently grounded in theory and policy to be useful in scholarly contexts. The framework should show how learners move from direct dependence and imitation toward guided learning, practical competence, independent inquiry and original knowledge creation. It should also connect learner categories to appropriate facilitators, dominant modes of learning, assessment evidence and inclusive support. The rapid expansion of digital technologies and generative artificial intelligence further increases the need for clear developmental and pedagogical distinctions, because technology can support learning but can also blur expectations about independence, evidence and authorship if it is not guided by sound pedagogy [11, 24, 25].

Purpose

The purpose of this article is to develop a theoretically grounded and practically usable classification of learners across educational levels. The specific objectives are to: (a) classify learners by educational level, internationally acceptable learner terminology, dominant mode of learning, facilitator role, key characteristics and observable outcomes; (b) explain the theoretical basis for viewing learner development as a continuum of increasing agency, competence and knowledge production; (c) propose a refined classification matrix and visual model that can guide curriculum design, pedagogy, assessment and learner support; and (d) identify implications, limitations and future validation pathways for the proposed Learning Independence Continuum.

Conceptual and Theoretical Foundations

The proposed classification draws from several complementary traditions. Developmental theories emphasize that children's learning is shaped by maturation, interaction and the gradual construction of cognitive structures. Piaget's work highlights the active role of the child in constructing knowledge, while Vygotsky's sociocultural theory emphasizes mediation, language, social interaction and scaffolding within the zone of proximal development [20, 27]. These ideas support the view that early and primary learning require deliberate guidance, concrete experiences and social interaction rather than abstract independent study alone.

Early childhood pedagogy further supports play-based, culturally responsive and developmentally appropriate learning. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (2020) emphasizes that developmentally appropriate practice should consider common developmental principles, individual variation and social-cultural context. This justifies classifying early childhood learners as children or early learners who require play, imitation, songs, stories, observation, dialogue and manipulation of objects as primary learning pathways.

For primary and secondary learners, constructivist and inquiry-oriented traditions suggest that learners move progressively from guided practice to more deliberate reading, writing, experimentation, discussion and problem-solving. Bruner (1960) argued for structured discovery and curriculum that enables learners to revisit ideas at increasing levels of complexity, while Dewey (1938) emphasized learning through experience, reflection and meaningful activity. These perspectives support a classification in which primary pupils engage in guided foundational learning and secondary students increasingly engage in subject-based inquiry, practical work and academic literacy.

For TVET and college-level learners, experiential and situated learning perspectives are particularly relevant. Kolb (1984) conceptualized learning as a cycle involving experience, reflection, conceptualization and experimentation, while Lave and Wenger (1991) emphasized participation in communities of practice. Contemporary TVET literature also emphasizes technical skills, transversal competences, workplace relevance and competence-based assessment [4, 16]. These perspectives support classifying TVET and college learners as trainees, apprentices or TVET learners whose learning is strongly linked to workshops, field practice, equipment, standards, portfolios and workplace tasks [2].

For undergraduate and postgraduate education, theories of adult learning, constructive alignment and self-regulated learning become increasingly important. Adult learners benefit from relevance, autonomy and opportunities to connect learning with experience [13]. Constructive alignment requires learning outcomes, teaching activities and assessment tasks to be deliberately matched [1]. Self-regulated learning literature highlights planning, monitoring, strategy use and reflection as learners become more autonomous [6, 28]. These ideas justify classifying undergraduates as disciplinary learners who increasingly regulate their own study and postgraduates as scholars or researchers engaged in supervised knowledge creation.

The LIC is also informed by learner agency and inclusive education. The OECD Learning Compass 2030 places student agency, competencies, values and well-being at the centre of future-oriented education [18]. Universal Design for Learning emphasizes multiple means of engagement, representation, action and expression as a way of reducing barriers to learning [5]. These perspectives caution against rigid labels. A learner classification should guide flexible scaffolding and resource allocation, not stereotype learners or deny support.

Policy and Practice Context

The classification aligns with policy frameworks that emphasize levels, pathways and lifelong learning. ISCED 2011 provides an internationally recognized framework for classifying education levels and qualifications, making it useful for mapping early childhood, primary, secondary, tertiary and advanced research education [26]. However, ISCED is primarily a statistical classification and does not by itself describe the pedagogical mode or learner support required at each level.

Contemporary global policy also emphasizes lifelong learning and the need to prepare learners for rapid social, technological and labour-market change. OECD Skills Outlook 2021 argues for learning across the life course in societies shaped by digitalization, demographic change, globalization and shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic [19]. UNESCO's report on the futures of education calls for a new social contract based on cooperation, knowledge, equity and public purposes of education [23]. These developments strengthen the need for a learner classification that is not merely administrative but pedagogical, developmental and future-oriented.

Digital technology adds both opportunity and risk. UNESCO's global education monitoring report on technology in education stresses that technology should be used on the basis of relevance, equity, scalability and sustainability [24]. Guidance on generative AI in education similarly emphasizes human-centred, ethical and capacity-building approaches [25]. Within the LIC, digital tools can support learning at all levels, but the nature of digital support should differ according to learner maturity, purpose, evidence requirements, ethical expectations and the educator's role.

II. Material And Methods

Conceptual Design

This article uses a conceptual framework development approach. Conceptual articles do not test hypotheses with primary empirical data; rather, they synthesize literature, clarify concepts, propose relationships and generate propositions for further investigation. The design followed a theory synthesis and model-building orientation, in which concepts from developmental, sociocultural, constructivist, experiential, competency-based, self-regulated, inclusive and higher education traditions were integrated to construct a pedagogical classification framework [9, 10].

The starting point was an author-developed learner classification matrix that organized learners by educational level, learner terminology, dominant mode of learning, personnel/facilitator, characteristics and observable outcomes. The matrix was not treated as empirical evidence. Instead, it functioned as an initial conceptual scaffold that was subjected to theoretical refinement, terminology correction and policy alignment.

Literature Identification and Synthesis

A purposive, integrative literature synthesis was used rather than a systematic review. The purpose was not to exhaust all literature on learner classification but to identify high-relevance theoretical, policy and empirical sources that could justify and refine the proposed framework. Sources were identified through targeted searches in education databases and scholarly search platforms, including ERIC, Google Scholar and publisher databases, as well as official education policy repositories. Search terms included learner classification, learner agency, developmental pedagogy, scaffolding, constructivism, experiential learning, competency-based education, TVET, self-regulated learning, Universal Design for Learning, digital education, generative AI in education, undergraduate learning and postgraduate supervision.

Classic sources were retained where they provided foundational theory, including Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky, Bruner, Kolb, Lave and Wenger, and Zimmerman. Recent literature from 2020 onward was added to strengthen contemporary relevance, especially on conceptual article design, TVET competence, self-regulated learning in digital contexts, universal design, lifelong learning, educational technology and doctoral supervision.

Policy documents were included when they provided widely used frameworks for education levels, competency-based curricula, quality assurance, TVET, inclusion, digital technology or lifelong learning.

Analytic Procedure

The framework was refined through five analytic steps. First, learner terminology was revised to avoid confusing or locally narrow labels and to use internationally acceptable terms such as early childhood learner, primary learner, secondary student, TVET/college learner, undergraduate student and postgraduate scholar/researcher. Second, the dominant learning mode at each level was aligned with relevant theory and policy. Third, the facilitator role was broadened from a single person in charge to a network of educators, mentors and support personnel appropriate to each level. Fourth, observable outcomes were expanded from narrow examples to broader assessment evidence, including developmental behaviours, literacy products, practical demonstrations, portfolios, internship reports, proposals, theses, articles, innovations and policy outputs. Fifth, the framework was checked against inclusive education and digital learning concerns to ensure that categories guide flexible support rather than rigid hierarchy.

The quality of the proposed framework was judged using four criteria: conceptual coherence, educational relevance, developmental appropriateness and practical usability. Conceptual coherence required that learner categories form a logical continuum. Educational relevance required alignment with educational levels and policy frameworks. Developmental appropriateness required recognition of differences in dependence, support, agency and self-regulation. Practical usability required that teachers, trainers, lecturers, supervisors and policy actors could apply the framework in planning, assessment and learner support.

III. Results

The proposed classification is summarized in Tables 1 and 2 and represented in Figures 1 and 2. The central argument is that learner classification should be understood as a continuum of increasing agency, competence and knowledge production. The continuum begins with the early childhood learner who learns through play, imitation, language and sensory experience. It moves through primary and secondary learning, where learners require structured guidance, foundational literacy, subject-based inquiry, practical work and increasing self-regulation. It then progresses to the TVET/college learner, who develops occupational competence through tools, equipment, standards, workshops and workplace practice; the undergraduate student, who learns through disciplinary study and applied inquiry; and the postgraduate scholar/researcher, who contributes to knowledge through supervised research.

Table 1: Core Learner Classification by Educational Level, Learner Term and Facilitator

Learner category	Indicative educational level	Preferred learner term	Primary educator/facilitator	Main pedagogical orientation
Early childhood learner	Pre-primary / early childhood education	Child; early learner	Early childhood educator; caregiver	Play-based, sensory, social and language-rich learning
Primary learner	Primary education	Pupil; primary learner	Primary teacher	Guided foundational learning in literacy, numeracy, social skills and values
Secondary learner	Lower and upper secondary education	Student; secondary learner	Subject teacher; guidance teacher	Subject-based inquiry, academic literacy, practical work and study habits
TVET/college learner	Certificate, diploma, apprenticeship and occupational training	Trainee; apprentice; TVET learner	Trainer; instructor; workplace mentor	Competency-oriented practical training, occupational standards and workplace preparation
Undergraduate learner	Bachelor's degree or equivalent	Undergraduate student	Lecturer; tutor; academic advisor	Disciplinary study, applied inquiry, academic literacy and increasing independent study
Postgraduate learner	Master's, doctoral and advanced research education	Postgraduate scholar; researcher	Research supervisor; mentor	Supervised research, critical scholarship, innovation and knowledge creation

Note. Terms should be adapted to national systems and journal style while preserving the pedagogical meaning of each category. The classification is not intended to rank learners but to align learning support with educational expectations.

Table 2: Learning Modes, Learner Characteristics and Observable Assessment Evidence Across the Continuum

Learner category	Dominant mode of learning	Characteristic support needs	Observable evidence of learning
Early childhood learner	Play, imitation, songs, stories, observation, dialogue and	High need for adult care, safety, language modelling, routine,	Speech development, social interaction, motor skills, curiosity,

Learner category	Dominant mode of learning	Characteristic support needs	Observable evidence of learning
	manipulation of objects	emotional support and social interaction	simple counting, recognition of colours, shapes, symbols and early self-care behaviours
Primary learner	Observation, guided practice, reading readiness, writing, numeracy tasks, storytelling and activity-based learning	Structured teacher guidance, repetition, formative feedback, concrete resources and gradual responsibility	Literacy, numeracy, drawing, reading, writing, problem solving, values, classroom routines and social skills
Secondary learner	Reading, experiments, assignments, discussion, practical work, projects and guided independent study	Subject-specific scaffolding, academic literacy support, career guidance, study routines and assessment feedback	Essays, compositions, practical reports, tests, projects, presentations, creativity and subject competence
TVET/college learner	Practical training, demonstrations, simulations, fieldwork, workshops, workplace learning and projects	Access to tools, equipment, safety guidance, occupational standards, coaching and workplace mentoring	Products, portfolios, demonstrations, technical skills, field reports, workplace evidence and competency-based assessment records
Undergraduate learner	Lectures, seminars, tutorials, laboratory work, fieldwork, reading, projects, LMS-supported learning and independent study	Academic advising, library access, digital learning support, feedback, research orientation and ethical academic conduct	Assignments, term papers, examinations, presentations, laboratory and field reports, practicum or internship reports and capstone projects
Postgraduate learner	Research seminars, literature review, proposal writing, methodology, data analysis, scholarly writing and dissemination	Supervision, peer review, ethical oversight, access to literature, research infrastructure, scholarly community and publication mentoring	Proposal, thesis or dissertation, oral defence, journal article, conference paper, innovation, policy brief and new knowledge

Note. The outcomes are illustrative rather than exhaustive. They should be adapted to curriculum level, learner diversity, discipline, institutional context and national qualification framework.

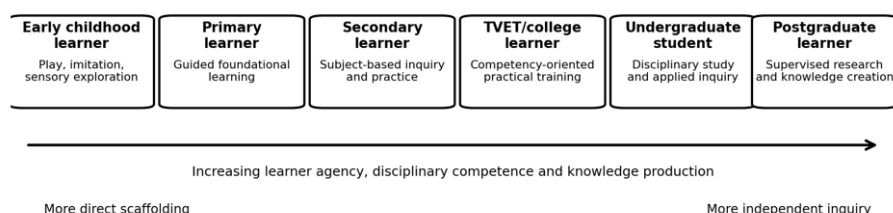


Figure 1: The Learning Independence Continuum (LIC). Learner agency and disciplinary competence generally increase across the continuum, while the form of scaffolding changes from direct guidance to facilitation, mentoring and supervision.

Learning Independence Continuum (LIC) Framework

Learner naming, facilitation and assessment evidence across educational levels

Early childhood	Primary	Secondary	TVET / college	Undergraduate	Postgraduate
Child / early learner	Pupil / primary learner	Secondary student	Trainee / apprentice	Undergraduate student	Scholar / researcher
EC educator / caregiver	Primary teacher	Subject teacher	Trainer / workplace mentor	Lecturer / tutor / advisor	Supervisor / mentor
Play evidence; developmental milestones	Literacy; numeracy; activity products	Projects; tests; practical reports; subject competence	Portfolios; demonstrations; workplace evidence	Assignments; term papers; capstone projects	Proposal; thesis; article; innovation

Direct external scaffolding	High support	→	Lower direct support
Learner self-direction	Emerging	→	Advanced
Knowledge work	Acquisition and application	→	Original contribution

Note. The continuum guides support and assessment design; it should not be used as a rigid hierarchy or as a basis for denying support.

Figure 2: The Learning Independence Continuum (LIC) Framework for Learner Classification, Facilitators and Assessment Evidence. It presents the continuum as a guide for aligning learner terminology, educator role, assessment evidence and support.

Conceptual Propositions

Proposition 1: Learner dependence on direct adult control generally decreases across the education continuum, but the need for skilled facilitation does not disappear; it changes form.

Proposition 2: Dominant learning modes shift from play and imitation to guided foundational learning, subject-based inquiry, competency-oriented practice, independent disciplinary study and supervised research.

Proposition 3: Observable evidence of learning shifts from developmental behaviours and basic literacy to projects, products, professional competence, scholarly outputs, innovation and new knowledge.

Proposition 4: Digital tools can support learner agency at every level, but their use should be developmentally appropriate, pedagogically justified, equitable and ethically guided.

Proposition 5: Inclusive pedagogy is required at all stages; learner classification should inform flexible support rather than create rigid labels or deny support.

IV. Discussion

The proposed framework improves learner classification in three main ways. First, it separates learner category from locally variable terminology. An early childhood learner may be called a child or early learner; a primary learner may be called a pupil or primary learner; a secondary learner is appropriately referred to as a student or secondary learner; a TVET learner may be a trainee, apprentice or TVET learner; an undergraduate learner is an undergraduate student; and a postgraduate learner may be a scholar or researcher. This terminology avoids confusing expressions and supports international readability.

Second, the framework connects each category to learning mode. Instructional design should begin not only with where learners are enrolled but also with how they are expected to learn and demonstrate learning. Early childhood learners require play, imitation, social interaction and sensory experiences. Primary learners require guided foundational learning. Secondary students require subject-based inquiry, academic literacy and practical work. TVET/college learners require tools, demonstrations, workshops, occupational standards and real or simulated work. Undergraduates require disciplinary inquiry, academic reading, writing and applied projects. Postgraduates require literature-based research, methodology, ethical inquiry, scholarly writing and supervision. This progression reflects a shift in cognitive demand, responsibility, self-regulation and evidence of competence.

Third, the framework clarifies how educator roles evolve across the continuum. The early childhood educator is not merely a content deliverer but a caregiver, language model and social guide. The primary teacher structures foundational literacy, numeracy, values and social habits. The secondary subject teacher introduces disciplinary thinking, practical investigation and academic routines. The TVET trainer supports occupational competence, safety, tool use and workplace readiness. The lecturer or tutor guides disciplinary understanding, academic literacy and applied inquiry. At postgraduate level, the supervisor mentors research design, ethics, analysis, writing, publication and knowledge dissemination [21].

The framework also has implications for assessment. Assessment for early childhood learners should rely heavily on observation, play evidence, developmental records, portfolios and demonstrations. Assessment for primary and secondary learners should combine formative assessment, written tasks, practicals, projects and summative tests. Assessment for TVET learners should include demonstrations, products, portfolios, workplace evidence and competence-based records. Undergraduate assessment should include examinations, projects, presentations, laboratory or field reports, practicum reports and capstone work. Postgraduate assessment should emphasize problem identification, proposal quality, methodological rigour, ethical practice, thesis or dissertation quality, publications, innovations, policy contributions and oral defence.

A key strength of the framework is that it makes learner independence visible without treating independence as abandonment. Even postgraduate scholars require supervision, peer review, research infrastructure, access to literature and ethical oversight. Similarly, young children are not passive recipients; they exercise agency through play, curiosity, questioning, imitation and social interaction. The continuum therefore refers to the changing form of support, not to the disappearance of support.

The framework is useful for competency-based education because it links curriculum outcomes to observable evidence. Competency-based education requires clarity about what learners should know, do and value. The proposed classification helps educators identify appropriate evidence for each level: developmental behaviours and language for early childhood learners, literacy and numeracy for primary pupils, subject competence for secondary students, occupational products for TVET learners, disciplinary projects for undergraduates and new knowledge for postgraduates. It also encourages a holistic understanding of competence that includes knowledge, technical skill, values, transversal competence, ethical judgment and lifelong learning capacity.

Implications for Educational Practice

For teacher education, the framework can help teachers understand that pedagogy must change with learner category. It discourages the use of university-style lecturing for young children and discourages excessive teacher control at higher levels where learners should gradually become self-directed. It also helps educators recognize that learner agency should be cultivated from the earliest stages rather than postponed until university.

For curriculum design, the framework supports constructive alignment. Curriculum developers can align learner category, learning activities, facilitator roles and assessment evidence. If the learner is a TVET trainee, the curriculum should include tools, practical workshops, occupational standards, field exposure and competence-based assessment. If the learner is a postgraduate scholar, the curriculum should include research seminars, proposal development, methodology, data analysis, scholarly writing, ethical review and dissemination.

For academic advising and supervision, the framework clarifies expectations. Undergraduate students should be guided to use libraries, learning management systems, laboratories, fieldwork and project work more independently. Postgraduate scholars should be guided to become ethical researchers, critical readers, independent analysts and producers of scholarly outputs. The framework can therefore support induction, mentoring, progression monitoring and supervisor-student expectation setting.

For inclusive education, the framework should be applied together with Universal Design for Learning. Learners differ in language, disability, socio-economic background, culture, gender, motivation, digital access and prior preparation. A category should never be used to deny support to a learner who needs it or to restrict a learner who is ready for more advanced tasks. Instead, classification should guide flexible scaffolding and multiple ways of engagement, representation, action and expression.

For digital and AI-supported learning, the framework provides a developmental lens. Digital tools can enrich play, support literacy, enable simulations, expand access to scholarly resources and provide feedback. However, learners require different levels of mediation, digital literacy, ethical guidance and verification skills. Generative AI should support learning and feedback, not replace learner effort, educator judgment, assessment integrity or original scholarly contribution.

Limitations

The proposed framework is conceptual and has not yet been empirically validated with learners, teachers, trainers, lecturers, supervisors, curriculum experts or policy actors. It is therefore best understood as a theoretically grounded classification requiring further testing in real educational settings.

The framework is also broad. Learners within the same category may differ significantly by age, disability, language background, prior schooling, socio-economic status, motivation, digital access and cultural context. In addition, some learners do not follow linear pathways: adult learners may return to basic education, TVET learners may enter university, experienced professionals may pursue postgraduate research, and gifted or well-supported learners may demonstrate advanced autonomy earlier than expected. The continuum should therefore be treated as a guide rather than a fixed hierarchy.

Finally, educational terminology varies across countries. The terms pupil, student, trainee, apprentice and scholar may carry different meanings in different national systems. The framework therefore emphasizes pedagogical meaning over rigid naming. Future journal submissions may need minor terminology adaptations depending on the target journal's international audience.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should empirically validate the Learning Independence Continuum using teacher interviews, learner focus groups, Delphi panels, classroom observations, curriculum document analysis and expert review. Quantitative studies could test whether the framework improves curriculum alignment, educator clarity, learner support, assessment quality or progression monitoring. Comparative studies could examine how learner names, facilitator roles and expected outcomes vary across countries, qualification frameworks and education systems.

Further work should also develop level-specific rubrics, observation tools and professional development modules based on the framework. Such tools would help translate the conceptual classification into classroom, workshop, laboratory, lecture hall, online learning and postgraduate supervision practice. Research is also needed on how digital technologies and generative AI alter learner independence, evidence of learning and ethical assessment across the continuum.

V. Conclusion

This article has proposed a Learning Independence Continuum for classifying learners across educational levels. The framework classifies learners as early childhood learners, primary learners, secondary

learners, TVET/college learners, undergraduate students and postgraduate scholars/researchers. It links each category to internationally acceptable learner terminology, dominant mode of learning, facilitator role, characteristic support needs and observable assessment evidence.

The article argues that learner classification should be more than an administrative label. It should guide pedagogy, assessment, supervision, resource allocation, digital support and learner support. As learners advance, they generally move from imitation and dependence toward guided learning, practical application, independent study and original knowledge creation. However, educators remain important at every level as caregivers, teachers, trainers, lecturers, advisors, supervisors and mentors. The proposed framework therefore offers a practical and scholarly tool for improving educational planning across basic education, TVET, undergraduate education and postgraduate research.

Declarations

Ethical Considerations

This conceptual manuscript did not involve human participants, animal subjects or collection of personal data. Formal ethics approval is therefore not applicable. If the framework is later tested with learners, teachers, institutions or other participants, ethical approval, informed consent and data protection procedures should be obtained according to institutional and national requirements.

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Conflict of Interest

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Data Availability

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AI-Use Declaration

ChatGPT generative AI tools were used to support language editing, structural refinement and formatting of this manuscript according to the journal template. The author remains responsible for the scholarly argument, verification of cited sources, accuracy of content, integrity of the framework and final submission decisions.

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