Learners ‘catch up’ with remedial teaching in Zambia: a partnership approach

Teaching-learning strategies

Citizen-led assessments

Teaching at the Right Level is a remedial teaching methodology gaining more and more ground in countries confronted with the Learning Crisis. VVOB – education for development implemented the methodology in primary schools in Zambia in partnership with J-PAL, IPA, Pratham, UNICEF, USAID and the country’s Ministry of General Education. A unique partnership approach resulted in a successful scale-up phase.

Learning crisis

As is the case in many countries, Zambia too succumbs to a worrying global trend: even though more learners than ever are in primary school, many of them are not learning. The quality of education remains substandard in what has been dubbed an ongoing ‘global learning crisis’ by international education experts. Assessment results in early grade literacy and numeracy show that in Zambia’s case 60 percent of pupils perform below their grade level.

Teaching at the Right Level

To address this challenge, Zambia’s Ministry of General Education has actively sought out effective remedial programmes in similar resource-limited contexts these last few years. At the same time, J-PAL Africa and partners (see below) had evidence that a Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) approach could improve learning outcomes. This evidence-based remedial teaching methodology, developed by Pratham in India, has been rigorously evaluated in other countries and proven effective. After a bidding process, VVOB was identified as the implementing partner in Zambia. A match was made.

TaRL has had different implementation modalities in other countries, with varying levels of involvement of the government and non-state actors in its roll-out. In Zambia, the government has embraced the teacher-led model of implementation. Teachers already working in the schools are at
the forefront of the TaRL roll-out. This was fully in line with VVOB’s approach to sustainable
development in general, which is all about capacity development of ministries of education and its
structures.

Catch Up: from pilot to scale

Implementing TaRL in Zambia was a process fittingly named Catch Up. In the pilot phase
(2016-2017), children from 80 schools in grades 3, 4 and 5 were grouped together, tested in both
numeracy and literacy skills with contextualised assessment tools, and regrouped according to level
rather than grade. In practice, this means that some learners in grade 3 might have better numeracy
skills than learners in grade 5, and that learners have a completely different level in numeracy than in
literacy. The learners then benefited from teaching ‘at their level’ in one of two schedules: either
during an intensive 1-month period or for one hour a day over a 6-month period.

In order to prepare them for the remedial classes, teachers of all three grades and administrators of
the targeted schools undergo a one-week training. The focus is on continuous assessment, learner-
centred teaching methods and the use of interactive activities that enhance critical and creative
thinking, peer learning and problem solving in children and contribute to a stimulating learning
environment. This pedagogical approach contrasts with the teacher-centred lecture-based teaching
methods practiced in the majority of Zambian schools.

The pilot phase showed that learners improved their numeracy and literacy skills by at least one
level. Catch Up’s implementation approach of the TaRL 6-month model is being scaled to 1.640
schools with 196.800 learners for testing, up from an already impressive 9.780 learners in the pilot
phase.

VVOB’s unique approach for sustainability of TaRL

As a non-profit organisation, VVOB has a mandate to work together with ministries of education and
its structures. This organisational approach allows VVOB to offer technical assistance in the form of
capacity development to these education partners. The end goal is to ensure that ministries
effectively take up leadership in innovative programmes and that these are fully integrated in the
governments’ policies.

Catch Up is a good example of this in Zambia. VVOB’s role in the project is to support the ministry’s
structures at all levels to embrace TaRL and roll it out. More concretely, VVOB provides quality
assurance of the trainings, monitors processes at all levels - from the classroom to the district and
provincial administration - , ensures all targeted children are part of the project and that the agreed-
upon steps are followed. The encouraging results from the pilot have indeed prompted the ministry to
consider adopting TaRL as its official remedial teaching programme and integrating TaRL techniques
in initial and continued teacher training programmes.

26-27 September 2018: Teaching at the Right Level conference
(Johannesburg, South Africa)

As more and more countries are planning to roll out TaRL, J-PAL Africa and Pratham have planned
an international conference on the subject in September. The conference will stimulate a platform of
exchange among implementing organisations and countries. Participants will learn from TaRL
experts, engage with TaRL resources and interact with education stakeholders who are equally
committed to improving basic skills. VVOB colleagues engaged in TaRL in Zambia will present the highlights of Catch Up.

Catch Up partners


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