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UNICEF EDUCATION

Education Case Study

ZAMBIA

Improving early grade reading and numeracy through 'Catch-Up,' a remedial learning programme

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To tackle the declining performance of learners in early grade literacy and numeracy, Zambia's Ministry of Education (MOE) piloted Catch-Up, a remedial programme based on the [Teaching at The Right Level \(TaRL\)](#) methodology. Catch-Up targets learners in Grades 3 to 5 by dedicating one hour per day for interactive lessons. Classes are facilitated by teachers and focus on building basic literacy and numeracy skills to help children who are behind in their learning to 'catch up'. Learners are grouped according to literacy and numeracy levels, rather than their age or grade. This allows them to progress at a pace more in tune with their level. Ultimately, Catch-Up also ensures that no child is left behind in the education system.

From November 2016 to April 2017, the MOE, with UNICEF support, implemented the Catch-Up pilot in 80 schools across four districts in Eastern and Southern Provinces. The TaRL approach helped enhance teachers' pedagogical skills and emphasised the use of formative assessment to provide greater insight into learner progress. This enabled more effective teaching plans that concentrated on phonemic awareness, phonics and fluency that learners might have missed in Grades 1 and 2. The programme encouraged teachers to make use of visual and practical teaching aids from resources found locally, often at little to no cost. Children enjoyed the learner centred approach which elevated their literacy and numeracy skills, helped them acquire confidence and taught them to work effectively in teams.

Learners quickly progressed from one level to another level in literacy and numeracy, signalling the success of the pilot. The methodology helped teachers to be better prepared. Students were more engaged due to interactive, dynamic lessons and absenteeism reduced for both learners and teachers. To ensure sustainability and MOE ownership of the programme, Catch-Up was implemented using the Ministry's existing teacher professional development and monitoring structures. This led to the Government scaling up the project to all 1,877 schools in Zambia's Eastern and Southern Provinces.

RESULTS

- In 2019, results from the scale up in Eastern and Southern Provinces showed a dramatic increase in the number of students in Grades 3-5 who could read at least a simple paragraph: from 68,892 learners at the beginning of the school year, to 110,228 at the end. Similarly, the number of students who could successfully do subtraction increased from 53,145 to 100,386. Catch-Up ultimately benefitted 160,968 early grade learners that school year, exceeding the overall target of 145,000 students.
- In 2020, Catch-Up in Zambia benefitted 239,663 students (125,471 girls), increasing their literacy and numeracy skills and preparing them for greater academic success as they transition to secondary school and beyond.
- Efforts to improve early grade literacy through Catch-Up were less substantial in 2021, due to the devastating effects of school closures related to COVID-19. While 65,105 learners were struggling to identify basic sounds at the start of the school year, 25,050 still struggled at the end and remained at the beginner level. In terms of math, learners who could add and subtract increased from 72,617 at the beginning of the year to 120,194 at the end.
- Absenteeism significantly reduced in the four pilot districts, and remarkably, Chipata District in Eastern Province recorded zero absenteeism for both learners and teachers.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **The success of Catch-Up in individual schools is dependent on strong school administration and leadership.** These leaders must show interest in the programme by supporting classroom implementation.
- **Monitoring is key to ensuring Catch-Up is implemented correctly and consistently.** This is done at school, zonal and district levels.
- **Schools with insufficient infrastructure face challenges with scheduling.** Schools must make deliberate efforts to schedule sessions to ensure that all Catch-Up learners can attend their remedial classes.
- **The support and involvement of parents is essential.** Parents ensure learners attend regularly and on time and come prepared.

NEXT STEPS

As of January 2022, Catch-Up is also being implemented in Eastern, Southern, Luapula and Lusaka Provinces and select districts of Muchinga, Northern and Western. Catch-Up benefits from strong MOE support and has demonstrated results in improving basic literacy and numeracy skills. Scale up is prioritised in provinces that are grappling with poor learner performance. Its expansion across the country, sustained interest in the programme and increased funding are testament to the success of Catch-Up and the TaRL methodology. Due to a successful pilot funded by UNICEF's regular resources, various donors have come on board to support the implementation in other provinces.

Cost effectiveness: From 2016 to date, UNICEF Zambia has provided US \$2,614,946.92 to 'catch up' more than 250,000 students who were behind in their learning and literacy and numeracy skills, setting a vital foundation for these learners to complete primary school successfully and transition to secondary school. UNICEF is supporting the MOE to shift Catch-Up into a national programme led and coordinated directly by the Ministry.

For more information, please contact:

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