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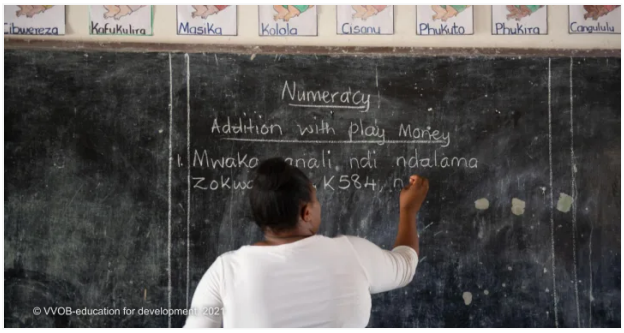
Opinion: Why foundational skills are vital to close the literacy gap

*By **Titus Syengo**, **Stefaan Vande Walle** // 29 September 2023*



In Zambia, a teacher introduces an accelerated literacy and numeracy intervention in her classroom, designed as a holistic approach to improving foundational skills among her students. Photo by: © VVOB-education for development, 2021

By reading this article, you're demonstrating your ability to read. When you figure out how much your groceries cost, you're using math. Words and numbers are all around: in newspapers, signs, advertisements, movie captions, contracts, and emails from colleagues. Yet literacy is under threat and urgent action and funding is needed.

Literacy is a part of foundational learning — a continuum of learning and proficiency in reading, writing, using numbers, and transferable skills such as socioemotional tools throughout life. People who can read and write are more likely to participate in civic life, volunteer, and contribute to their communities, contributing to economic prosperity, peace, and sustainable development.

Foundational skills not only help you understand the world better, they also allow children to learn more complicated concepts as they advance in their grades and curriculum. If they fail to attain these skills in early grades, they fall behind and if nothing is done, may be unable to catch up.

This year marks the midpoint of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, a set of 17 goals adopted by the United Nations to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure prosperity for all. As global education experts, while we celebrate progress made on SDG 4 on education, and most recently have seen initiatives in enrolling children and adopting interventions to help them catch up after the COVID-19 pandemic, it remains a sobering reality that many children are still not acquiring foundational reading and numeracy skills. Globally, 86% of the population is now literate but inequalities remain, notably between sub-Saharan Africa and the rest of the world.

Data shows that 9 in 10 children in schools in sub-Saharan Africa cannot read or understand questions related to a short piece of writing, which they should be able to do by age 10. A recent Progress in International Reading Literacy Study assessment revealed declines in reading skills in 22 out of 31 countries with comparable data from 2016 to 2021.

Geopolitical evolutions and technological innovations create a world in transition and pose threats to livelihoods and in turn, education and literacy. But as we adapt, opportunities also emerge to increase foundational skills through scalable and cost-effective solutions. The world should act now to achieve SDG 4 by 2030.

Prioritize funding for education

Governments need to prioritize funding for education especially for foundational learning of literacy and numeracy in primary school.

Education budgets in Africa have been under pressure in recent years due to rising food prices and inflation. In 2020, the average education budget in sub-Saharan Africa was 3.4% of gross domestic product. This is below the global average of 4.3 % of GDP, meaning that despite rising learner populations, African governments are spending relatively less on education than governments in other parts of the world.

This has negative implications on making education free and compulsory, increasing the number of teachers, improving basic school infrastructure, and embracing digital transformation.

Cost-effective solutions for literacy

Second, governments should look to evidence-informed and cost-effective solutions to achieve better literacy outcomes fast and at scale. There is a need for tailored instruction that focuses on the individual needs of each learner in the classroom.

One of these solutions is the Teaching at the Right Level, or TaRL, methodology, which received a strong recommendation from the Global Education Evidence Advisory Panel as a highly effective teaching approach. The approach assesses and groups learners based on their learning level rather than their age or grade, and uses play-based activities to help them catch up on basic language and math. In Africa, this methodology is implemented in more than 12 countries and has shown remarkable results.

For instance in Zambia, the localized version of TaRL, known as “Catch Up,” started out in 2016 as a small pilot in 80 schools by the Ministry of General Education with the

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support of NGOs and has grown to more than half of all primary and community schools in the country. It is now being driven and scaled nationally by the Zambian government. As a result, in 2022, more than 111,000 learners who could not read words at the start of the school year could do so at the end. Moreover, we have learned that sustainable teaching solutions require teacher buy-in. Ongoing research in Zambia shows that teachers want to implement Catch Up, motivated by the learning improvements they are witnessing.

Leveraging ICT for literacy

Third, there is a need for education systems to leverage the use of information and communications technology, or ICT. Developments in generative artificial intelligence tools hold the promise of widespread access to quality instructional materials and personalized learning.

Yet technology in education has faced many false dawns and risks increasing inequities. Evidence for scalable and cost-effective ICT solutions in primary education is scarce. Therefore, ICT is best introduced cautiously and in tandem with teacher training and support, as argued by the recent Global Education Monitoring report. Some examples of how ICT has been put to good use in education include how education management information systems and online data portals have been used to improve monitoring of education performance and improve targeted support for teachers.

Sub-Saharan Africa will need an additional 6.1 million primary school teachers by 2030 according to the International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030. In addition, many teachers lack the qualifications and competences to teach foundational skills. Technology can help teacher trainers to support teachers through blended (in-person and remote)

continuous professional development. Not only does blended continuous professional development increase the accessibility of training opportunities by eliminating geographical and time constraints, but it is also cost-effective. In the context of education, remote learning initiatives have also proven effective in enhancing teacher proficiency.

Seven years remain to achieve SDG 4. The time to act is now. Literate societies have the best chance to successfully navigate a world in transition. The good news is that we have reliable insight, evidence, and examples of what works at scale.

Accelerated targeted instructions implemented in schools by teachers makes a difference in the lives of thousands of learners. Blended continuous professional development is a promising avenue to address shortages in teachers and teacher competences.

Literacy is a human right, there is really no excuse for not achieving it. So, as we stand at this milestone moment, we need a shared commitment — a commitment to fostering foundational skills, empowering educators, and leveraging technology responsibly.

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The views in this opinion piece do not necessarily reflect Devex's editorial views.

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