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# Teaching at the Level of the Child

## Abstract

*Reorienting teaching to the level of the student is improving learning outcomes for over 50 million students in India and Africa.*

Research in India, Kenya, and Ghana has shown that reorienting teaching to the level of the student, rather than the rigid expectations of a curriculum, consistently improves learning outcomes. In response, the NGO Pratham and state governments have scaled the approach to reach millions of children in India. In Ghana, the government piloted the model and is now conducting a follow-up study to explore ways to improve implementation. And in Zambia, the Ministry of General Education, in partnership with J-PAL, Pratham, UNICEF, VVOB Zambia, IPA and other partners, will scale its targeted instruction program to approximately 1,800 schools over the next three years.



Credit: Stella Benezra

## The Challenge

*Despite record high enrollment rates, an estimated 250 million primary school age children lack basic reading, writing, and numeracy skills.*

Many developing countries have greatly expanded access to primary school education, spurred by initiatives such as the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, which called for achieving universal primary education by 2015. Yet educating more children has strained education systems, and in many developing nations primary school education is failing to equip a large portion of students with even basic reading, writing, and math skills.

- **India** In 2012, 53 percent of grade 5 students could not read grade-2-level texts proficiently, and 75 percent of grade 5 students were unable to solve questions involving division, a grade 4 level competency. By grade 8, 24 percent of students cannot read at the grade 2 level or above, and 52 percent of students cannot perform math at a grade 4 level.<sup>1</sup>
- **Ghana** The 2016 national assessment in Ghana found no more than 37 percent of pupils achieving proficiency levels in any grade or subject. Performance was noticeably lower for mathematics than for English. In grade 4, 29 percent and 45 percent of pupils performed below the minimum competency level in English and math, respectively.<sup>2</sup>

- **Zambia** A 2014 national assessment found that 68 percent of grade 2 learners were unable to read a single word in their local language. Grade 5 students also scored poorly in local language and mathematics.<sup>3</sup>

The typical age-grade organization of schools, combined with unrealistically fast paced and broad curriculum standards, seem to be major constraints in helping children learn effectively. Teachers may not have the pedagogical tools to identify learning levels and then calibrate their teaching accordingly, and students who are far behind the scheduled curriculum may lose interest and fall behind even further.

## The Evidence

*Programs that organized students by learning level improved learning outcomes.*

Teaching at the level of the child is a pedagogical approach that involves evaluating children using a simple assessment tool and then grouping them according to learning level rather than age or grade. Each group is taught starting from its current ability level, and level-appropriate learning activities and materials are used. Throughout the entire process, teachers assess their pupils' progress through ongoing, simple measurement of their ability to read, write, and comprehend and do basic arithmetic.

Results from multiple evaluations in India,<sup>4</sup> beginning as early as 2001, show that programs for teaching at the level of the child are consistently effective in raising student test scores. Evidence from Kenya further demonstrated the efficacy of organizing classrooms by students' initial learning levels even in a government context, and a recent nationwide evaluation in Ghana found significant improvements in numeracy and literacy on average, with regional variations highlighting the importance of implementation quality. The Ghana evaluation conducted by IPA tested four different variations of the program, of which in-school and after-school remedial lessons delivered by teacher community assistants had the largest impact on pupil achievement.

While the implementation of this model can take many forms (e.g. with government teachers or lightly trained volunteers/para teachers; during the school day or outside of school hours), there are three key components that are consistent across the various programs studied: 1) Students' learning levels are assessed at the beginning of the school year or program, 2) students are grouped based on their learning levels, and 3) students are taught in these groups using level-appropriate materials rather than based on a rigid national curriculum.

## The Impact

*Evidence has informed the scale-up of programs and pilots that teach at the level of the child in India, Ghana, and Zambia, reaching millions of children.*

- **India** With support from J-PAL, teaching at the level of the child is reaching some 50 million students in India through Pratham's two main programs: (1) the learning camp model (which provides intensive bursts of instruction to children by learning

level); and (2) their support of state governments to integrate the program into the school system.

- **Ghana** In 2014, the Government of Ghana, with support from IPA, completed a pilot of the model which reached 25,000 students. The government is now conducting a follow-up study with IPA Ghana to explore ways to improve implementation with stronger monitoring.
- **Zambia** The Zambian Ministry of General Education is scaling up a program called Catch Up to approximately 1,800 schools in Zambia over the next three years. Based on the Teaching at the Right Level approach, the Catch Up program aims to improve basic literacy and numeracy skills of primary school students in grades 3–5. J-PAL Africa, Pratham, UNICEF, VVOB Zambia, IPA and many other partners are working with the Zambian government to leverage the evidence on teaching at the right level to help design, pilot, and expand the Catch Up program. In 2016 and 2017, the government piloted Catch Up in eighty schools, and IPA led an independent process monitoring of the pilot.

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## Sources

<sup>1</sup> ASER Centre. 2013. Annual Status of Education Report 2012. New Delhi: Pratham. Accessed at:

[http://img.asercentre.org/docs/Publications/ASER%20Reports/ASER\\_2013/ASER2013\\_report%20sections/aser2013fullreportenglish.pdf](http://img.asercentre.org/docs/Publications/ASER%20Reports/ASER_2013/ASER2013_report%20sections/aser2013fullreportenglish.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Ghana 2016 National Education Assessment: Report of Findings. Accessed at:

<https://globalreadingnetwork.net/eddata/ghana-2016-national-education-assessment>

<sup>3</sup> Zambia's National Assessment Survey 2014 Report. Accessed at:

<http://www.exams-council.org.zm/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/2014-NAS-Report.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Including Balsakhi Remedial Tutoring, Information and Community Mobilization, and two others: Read India and Learning Enhancement Program (LEP).