

Contextualizing and adapting an evidence-based education intervention: A case study of Teaching at the Right Level

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ABSTRACT

Background

The learning crisis in Sub-Saharan Africa is well documented, where 9 out of 10 primary school students pass a minimum proficiency threshold in reading and mathematics (World Development Report, 2018). Without this base, children are less likely to finish primary school and proceed to secondary; and have overall lower socio-economic outcomes later in life. In the search for solutions, research has demonstrated that a number of approaches are effective in improving basic learning outcomes. However, persistent challenges remain in the implementation of such evidence-based approaches: in reality, such approaches may be ignored, adopted in a new context without necessary adaptation, or adapted as a once-off exercise rather than an ongoing iterative process. As a result, these approaches fail to maintain impact at scale or sustainably integrate into government systems. Scaling evidence-based initiatives in new contexts demands continuous adaptations for success, striking a delicate balance between preserving core principles and ensuring feasibility and effectiveness across diverse settings.

Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL), initially developed in India in the early 2000s by the education NGO Pratham, has emerged as a beacon of scalable educational intervention. Over the past decade, TaRL has undergone extensive scaling efforts in Africa and beyond, reaching millions of children across 22+ countries. With a robust evidence base established in India and expanding in Africa, TaRL demonstrates remarkable cost-effectiveness and impact. Notably, it stands out as one of the few initiatives with large-scale implementation across a diverse array of locations, employing a range of program delivery models.

Case Study Approach

Using a case study approach, this paper traces how TaRL Africa has approached adapting the evidence-based TaRL intervention in Zambia, Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria, and Uganda.

The TaRL Africa philosophy is that for TaRL programming to remain effective it needs to retain the core principles and take into account local potential and constraints. This paper delves into the application of the core principles across the four contexts. First, we describe the context in which TaRL was introduced in these contexts. We then dissect key components of adaptation (the “what”), encompassing program delivery models, teaching-learning activities and materials, teacher support mechanisms, and institutionalization processes. Moreover, we share the iterative process of adaptation over time (the “how”), elucidating the dynamic evolution of TaRL implementation.

Reflections and Conclusion

Although TaRL Africa is still working with governments across Africa to adapt and integrate TaRL into these education systems, initial results of TaRL take-up and implementation are promising: More than 5 million children have received TaRL in Sub-Saharan Africa with most large-scale government-led programs resulting in a 2-6 times increase in the proportion of children reading and doing basic math within 6-8 months of implementation.

The key lessons from this case study are to: (a) co-create a program with those who will own and run the program in the long run; (b) focus time and attention on implementation details; and (c) regularly adapt the design of the program as you learn what is and isn't working.

These findings and reflections are an important contribution towards an understanding of what it takes to meaningfully engage in adapting evidence-based programming across different contexts. The paper provides practical scaling lessons to policymakers, donors, and implementation organizations. Additionally, it generates pivotal implementation-related research questions to further inform future scaling endeavors in global education.