



Accelerated learning programs around the world are helping disadvantaged, over-age, out-of-school children and youth catch up to their more advantaged peers.

Accelerated Learning

to Reach Children
Furthest Behind

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Foundational literacy and numeracy competencies are at the core for lifelong learning. Currently, we are facing a crisis of "too much schooling, yet very little learning." Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the World Bank had estimated that 617 million (53%) of the children globally could not read a basic text by the age 10, with 202 million of these children living in Sub-Saharan Africa. When 98% of the world's schooling population was out of school because of the pandemic-related school closures, the proportion of learning poverty was estimated to increase to 70%.

In Kenya, the Uwezo learning assessment of 2015 established that 3 out of 10 learners age 6-16 could not read a Grade 2-level story. Eight percent of Grade 8 students had not attained similar competency levels. These children had spent at least 8 years in school without learning the basics, implying that they would go back to their communities with minimal benefits from formal education. Further analysis of the Uwezo data showed that marginalization was a factor, as a majority of the counties at the bottom of the assessment could be classified as either poor, arid and semi-arid, or marginalized in some way.

In response to these concerns, Zizi Afrique Foundation, Safaricom Foundation, CREADIS, Maridhiano, and the Diocese of Lodwar collaborated to adapt and implement the Accelerated Learning Program (ALP). The ALP works toward accelerating the acquisition of foundational literacy and



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numeracy among learners furthest behind in Kenya. It is inspired by principles of Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL), an initiative of Pratham and JPAL.

The ALP was implemented in three of the bottom 10 regions. It targeted learners who could not read in Grades 3 to 5 to ensure they were reading with comprehension and learning and reasoning with numbers. The intervention is intensive and time-bound (30-50 days). For each region, local organizations were identified for collaboration; CREADIS, Maridhiano, and the Diocese of Lodwar worked in Bungoma, Tana River, and Turkana counties, respectively.



About the Accelerated Learning Program Approach

The Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL)¹ approach applies principles of formative assessments and level-wise grouping and learning to ensure children lagging in the foundational literacy and numeracy competencies catch up within a relatively short period, usually 30-50 days. Zizi Afrique adapted these principles under the ALP for implementation in the Kenyan context as follows:

- **Assessment.** Learners are individually assessed (one-on-one) using the Uwezo literacy/numeracy tools to determine their learning levels. As a result, they are placed as beginner (can only recognize 0-3 letters); letter (can only recognize 4 letters); word (can only identify 4-5 words); paragraph (can read a short paragraph, usually up to 24 words with fewer than 2 mistakes); and/or story (can read a 60- to 70-word story with fewer than 2 mistakes).
- **Grouping.** To ensure learners are instructed at their level, they are grouped into either beginner/letter (Group 1), word (Group 2), or paragraph (Group 3); they are handled at these levels during sessions, irrespective of their age or grade. Learners who are proficient at story reading are not involved in the intervention, as they already have attained the basics of independent reading.
- **Goal setting.** Within these groups, teacher assistants or volunteers who have been reskilled on targeted instruction set goals consistent with the progress the learners should achieve every 10 days. The ideal is that every learner progresses to at least one higher level of competency. For instance, learners at beginner level should be proficient at letter identification within 10 days, whereas those at word level should progress to sentence reading within 10 days.
- **Targeted instruction.** With specific learning levels and needs identified per child and goals set for every 10-day cycle, teachers prepare lessons and learning experiences consistent with the needs of the various groups. Key ingredients during these sessions include learner involvement, innovative learning experiences, manipulation of materials, and peer learning. Learning experiences should be not only engaging, but also challenging enough to move the child to the set goal.

Enablers to Successful Implementation of ALP

Throughout the implementation period, we embraced three strategies:

- **Parental engagement is vital for continuous improvement of learning outcomes.** Before launching the intervention at school, the program summarizes baseline results per school into school report cards and shares them with parents during school-based community conversations convened through the head teachers. The aim is to enlighten parents about the learning situation in their schools, highlight prominent challenges, and sensitize parents

on the need for their involvement. The meetings culminate into social pacts where parents make commitments on how they will support the improvement of learning at home and at school. During the intervention, home visits are conducted to follow up on absentee learners.

- **Because capacities of teachers (and school leaders) matter in bringing about a difference, reskilling of teacher assistants is important.** Teacher assistants (TAs) undergo a mandatory three-day reskilling on literacy and numeracy concepts, assessment, grouping, goal setting, strategies for community engagement, development of targeted instructional plans, and delivery of interactive and engaging learning sessions to hasten learning. After three months, all TAs receive two-day refresher training sessions to address emerging gaps. At the school level, TAs receive ongoing mentorship and support from head teachers and program officers.
- **Continuous review of evidence to inform change.** Monitoring is regularized, taking place daily at the partner level and quarterly by the program management team. Insights gathered are used to inform the design of refresher training as well as tweak the delivery approach.

What Adaptations Did We Make?

- **Adapting assessments.** Though similar in structure, the Uwezo tools—developed for East Africa—are aligned to country-specific curriculum expectations for Grade 2 learners. This alignment ensures a contextual fit, with evidence thus generated proving relevant to the Ministry of Education and other stakeholders. The Uwezo tools are adapted through a selected panel, with representatives from key government institutes, teachers, and researchers.
- **Adapting language.** Before the adaptation in Kenya, TaRL had not been adapted for Kiswahili interventions, at least not in Africa. Applying the same principles and repackaging the learning



resources for a Kiswahili intervention was a one-of-a-kind endeavor. Even then, Kiswahili became the priority intervention language in Kenya, as it is closely related to the indigenous (home) languages spoken by the targeted learners. To facilitate this transition, TAs were selected based on their fluency in speaking the indigenous languages.

- **Contextualizing the range of learning resources.** A key addition to the range of leveled resources was the development of readers in indigenous languages and leveled workbooks for use at home. This ensures learners have a resource that is pegged at their level, granting them an opportunity to sharpen the mastery of concepts gained through individual practice.
- **Varied modes of delivery (school, community, hybrid).** A program that began as only school-based has evolved over the years, allowing the team to explore different forms of delivering the ALP. The delivery has combined school and community approaches—from purely school-based sessions in 2018, to purely community-based sessions in 2020 (applying radio, SMS, and print resources), to a hybrid intervention in 2021. In 2021, the community approach was further diversified to include the provision of tablets, selection of parent learning champions, and use of community volunteers as literacy champions in their communities.

How Has the Approach Evolved Over Time?

From the initial rollout in 11 schools in 2018 to the expanded scope of 150 schools by 2021 across three counties (regions), the program has evolved constantly. New delivery approaches and the adoption of low-tech solutions ensure learning continuity.

- **ALP at school (school-based Implementation approach) (September 2018 – March 2020).** This phase of intervention within schools lasted two hours per day, for 10 consecutive days (one camp) through the support of 139 teacher assistants. It marked a period of feasibility testing for the approach. Within the first year of implementation, results showed that within 30 days, more than half (53%) of the learners acquired independent reading. This motivated the expansion of the program from 60 to 119 schools, and inspired civil societies to adapt it for their contexts. By the end of 2019, five local organizations had adopted the approach, benefitting over 24,000 learners. Reflecting on this phase, three lessons were integral in defining the next phase.
 1. There was a need to consider the language competencies learners are endowed with from home. In the homogenous contexts, the program placed a requirement on the engaged teacher assistants to each possess oral skills in the language of the catchment

area. This intensified the efforts to develop resources in the indigenous language (Ng'aturkana). By the end of 2019, the team had collected over 90 indigenous stories, which were packaged into leveled readers and complemented other resources during the learning sessions.

2. There was better clarity around how formative assessment could inform targeted instruction. The experiences of assessing and thereafter designing learning sessions aligned to individual learning needs led to an appreciation of the place of formative assessment in accelerating learning for children who are furthest behind.



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3. There was aligning of continuous professional development for teachers to the emerging classroom needs. We introduced targeted lesson planning as a training module to assist teachers during planning.
- **Community-based Implementation (during COVID-19 closures).** Though unprecedented, this second approach ensured continuity of learning for 6,473 learners in the arid, semi-arid, and poor regions. A hybrid approach encompassing the use of SMS (tailored to the level of individual learners), deployment of weekly radio programs, and study packs (leveled workbooks and readers) resulted in improved competency levels for over 1,850 learners. In consultation with communities and local leaders, learning happened at designated spaces. As a result, we recorded increased agency among parents and communities. For instance, the International Literacy Day celebrations in September 2020 were organized at the community level, with parents taking charge of the day's events. More so, we established that self-paced learning is possible when relevant resources are available and used.
 - **A hybrid intervention (combining school and community) approach.** Following school re-opening in 2021, the school-based camps resumed. These were complemented by: 1) a parent-led weekend program where groups of learners met to read stories loaded on a tablet, and 2) a youth-led volunteer approach where youth volunteers organized after-school, community-based literacy sessions. These two serve as sustainability avenues. In addition, intense efforts have focused on working with teacher training colleges (TTCs) to embed the methodology into pre-service teacher training.

Cumulatively, over 27,000 learners have participated in this intervention (in the literacy module) and 60% of them



transitioned from the intervention having acquired the requisite literacy skills.

Impact of COVID-19 Lockdowns

The children who were furthest behind in school bore the greatest brunt of the learning losses associated with COVID-19. Remote learning programs, though a commendable response, did not reach most of them. Globally, UNICEF reported that only 60% of countries adopted remote learning policies targeting early childhood learners, adding that 3 out of 4 students who could not be reached by the remote learning policies were from rural areas and/or belonged to the poorest households.² The COVID-19 closures was a period for the ALP team to:

- **Acknowledge the vulnerabilities experienced by learners furthest behind, a disadvantage further compounded by poverty, hunger, and high levels of illiteracy in their communities.** A survey conducted in the three counties (4,376 households) of implementation revealed that 64% of households had not continued with any form of learning during the closure period: 80% lacked a radio, 32% had no literate adult around them, and hunger and drought had forced their families to migrate. For learners who were struggling with the basics of learning before the pandemic, the prolonged closure period compounded their vulnerability. This informed the decision to adopt the particular ALP intervention.
- **Diversify and adapt the ALP delivery, to ensure that those marginalized were supported to continue learning.** We did this through the provision of



solar-powered radios to 1,660 of the most-deserving households, through airing a weekly radio program, through provoking the involvement of parents through SMS content, and through the provision of study packs. As a result, over 6,400 learners continued to learn and 1,850 improved their competency levels.

- **Embrace technology at various levels of programming, such as capacity building for teachers, delivery of learning (radio, SMS), research (phone-based interviews), and program monitoring.** TAs received a virtual orientation on data collection and on the use of Kobo for data submission, enabling us to reach over 4,500 households amid the closures. In one region, TAs conducted phone-based interviews due to restricted movement.

What have we learned in terms of extending reach and scaling impact?

- **Pay attention to learners' first language competencies.** Over the years, the issue of language has played out prominently. Learners in the lowest levels of learning (beginner, letter, and sometimes word) required a mediated approach to bridge the gap between the language competencies they have from home and the language of instruction at school. This informed the selection of TAs engaged to support the intervention and, by extension, the development of learning resources in indigenous languages. In designing programs targeted at foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN), innovations therefore should consider the first language competencies and align to these while designing their programs.
- **Parents and communities as champions of FLN.** Though critical, achieving parent and community buy-in is sometimes hindered by inadequacies, such as limited information on how to get involved and illiteracy; these, in turn, hinder effectiveness of approaches such as SMS-based learning. To date, parents and youth have immensely contributed to the gains realized within the program, from volunteering their time as champions to organizing learning at the community level

(for an example, watch the video about the Galili Village³). A successful program should therefore incorporate parents and youth (community) in their design.

- **Power of networks and collaborations.** Over the years, Zizi Afrique has inducted over 20 organizations into the implementation of the ALP approach, which has expanded the reach beyond Zizi. Truly, “it takes a village to educate a child.” We have extended our reach—collaborating with other organizations—to Uganda, Tanzania, Botswana, and Mozambique, with a combined reach of over 50,000 learners in four years.
- **Focus on pre-service and in-service teacher training.** “In Teacher Training Colleges (TTCs), we rarely connect teacher training and learning outcomes at school,” says a principal in one of the TTCs in Kenya. In reality, this disconnect has meant traditional methods of teacher training persist over the years; as a result, learners continuously fall behind on their foundational competencies, exacerbating the FLN crisis. A holistic approach to bridging the gap—which entails revamping teacher training strategies, designing catch-up or remedial programs for those lagging behind, and targeted and continuous reskilling of teachers—is paramount.

Now, as the pandemic restrictions ease, the ALP adaptations offer effective means for accelerated learning for the learners furthest behind around the world. If focus is placed on what works, the end to the global learning crisis may be foreseeable: one village, one camp, and one learner at a time.

Notes:

¹ <https://www.teachingattherightlevel.org/>

² <https://data.unicef.org/topic/education/remote-learning-and-digital-connectivity/>

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TULIyh38MWI&t=5s>

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