[Embargoed until March 18, 00:01 am Zambia time]

National study in Zambia finds a focus on teaching the basics leads to broad learning gains over time

Photo: Students in Zambia learn foundational reading and math skills in the national "Catch Up" program, an adaptation of the Teaching at the Right Level approach. Photo courtesy of VVOB.

Lusaka, Zambia — [Embargoed until March 18, 00:01 am Zambia time] A new national study of Zambia's Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) program finds that helping children build foundational literacy and math skills can lead to broader learning gains over time.

Andreas de Barros, an invited researcher at J-PAL and Assistant Professor at the University of California, Irvine, and Theresa Lubozha, Strategic Education Advisor at the international non-profit VVOB - *education for development*, will share the results on March 19 at a convening in Lusaka hosted by Zambia's Ministry of Education.

Many children in low- and middle-income countries leave primary school without basic math and reading skills. Governments and NGOs are responding by investing in remedial programs, such as TaRL, which focuses on building specific foundational skills. This study is the first randomized evaluation of a national scale-up of a TaRL program and fills a gap in evidence on whether the returns to targeted foundational instruction extend beyond the skills directly taught.

The government of Zambia launched "Catch Up," a national adaptation of the TaRL approach, in 2016 to address low learning levels. The program aims to help students in grades three through five

build basic reading and math skills and reaches more than one million students each year. Since 2001, researchers in the J-PAL network have partnered with Pratham, the Indian NGO that created the Teaching at the Right Level approach, to scale up and evaluate TaRL adaptations across India and Africa.

The study

In Zambia, researchers partnered with the Ministry of Education, TaRL Africa, and VVOB to investigate whether teaching a focused set of basic reading and math skills leads to broader learning across subjects, and whether providing additional professional development to teachers amplifies those gains.

To study the program's effects over two years, the researchers carried out one of the largest education experiments ever conducted, involving more than 1,100 schools across 182 administrative zones. Separately, to study the program's long-term effects as students reach early adolescence, they analyzed 4.4 million exam scores from all primary school leaving examinations administered in the country over the past 12 years.

The results

In the short run, after two years in the program, students in program schools improved their literacy and basic math skills that the program directly teaches, but showed little improvement in other math skills not targeted by the program. By the end of primary school, however, students performed better across both subjects on comprehensive national exams covering skills well beyond what the program targets.

When researchers measured only the specific math skills the program targets, the program appeared nearly three times more cost-effective in the short run than when they used a comprehensive assessment of foundational skills. This raises concerns that evaluations of similar programs may overstate their short-run benefits. At the same time, the program's positive effects on comprehensive national exams years later suggest that short-run assessments of non-targeted skills may understate its long-run value.

Adding a professional development component for teachers, which doubled program costs per student, produced no additional learning gains despite strong engagement. This finding has direct implications for how Ministries of Education allocate limited resources: In settings where teaching capacity is constrained, a clear focus on teaching basic skills alone may matter more than additional investments in professional development.

"What makes this finding notable is that Zambia's Catch Up program isn't a small pilot—it operates in more than 5,000 schools with regular government teachers," said de Barros. "In the short run, we

saw very large impacts on the specific skills the program targets, but almost no improvement in other math skills. Yet later, the same program improved comprehensive exam scores in both subjects. That combination is what makes this study distinctive. Focusing on the basics may not show its full value right away—but over time, it can contribute to broader learning gains that go well beyond the specific skills these programs target."

de Barros and Lubozha outline the full results of the study in their newly published working paper [*link to go live on March 18*], "Targeting Foundational Skills at Scale: Skill Specificity and Transfer."

For more information about J-PAL's work on education, visit povertyactionlab.org/sector/education.

Media contact: Brielle Powers, bpowers@povertyactionlab.org

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Working Paper Citations

de Barros, A., & Lubozha, T. (2026). *Targeting Foundational Skills at Scale: Skill Specificity and Transfer* (Working Paper No. 12542; CESifo Working Paper Series). https://www.ifo.de/sites/default/files/docbase/docs/cesifo1_wp12542.pdf [*link to go live on March 18*]

de Barros, A., & Lubozha, T. (2026). *Targeting Foundational Skills at Scale: Skill Specificity and Transfer* (Working Paper No. 259; CEGA Working Paper Series). https://doi.org/10.26085/C3WG6F [*link to go live on March 18*]

About J-PAL

The Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) is a global research center working to reduce poverty by ensuring that policy is informed by scientific evidence. Anchored by a network of more than 1,100 researchers at universities around the world, J-PAL conducts randomized impact evaluations to answer critical questions in the fight against poverty.

J-PAL co-founders Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo, with longtime affiliate Michael Kremer, were awarded the 2019 Nobel Prize in Economics for their pioneering approach to alleviating global poverty. For more information, visit https://www.povertyactionlab.org/