



# AFRICA LEARNING | TOGETHER

Helping Students to Catch-Up  
in Zambia



By **Andrew Bakuluma  
and Linda Zuze**

## Summary

In this first edition of ADEA's 'Africa Learning Together' knowledge series, Linda Zuze and Andrew Bakuluma discuss the impact of the Catch-Up Programme in Zambia. Catch-Up is a remedial teaching programme designed to improve learning outcomes among students in Grades 3 to 5. It is led by the Zambian Ministry of Education (MoE) and supported by VVOB, UNICEF and TaRL Africa. From a pilot of 80 schools, it operates in over 4,400 schools in eight of Zambia's ten provinces.

## Background

Teacher education can be heavy on theory and light on practical preparation, making it difficult for teachers to do their job well.

School closures during the Covid-19 pandemic created further setbacks for children. Teachers face an enormous challenge to make up for lost ground, but improving the quality of teaching through scalable programmes is possible. Andrew Bakuluma is a Foundational Numeracy Specialist at VVOB in Zambia. Recently, he sat down with us to explain how the Catch-Up Programme led by the Zambian Ministry of Education (MoE) and supported by VVOB, UNICEF and TaRL Africa, bridges the gap between theory and practice. Catch-Up is a remedial teaching programme that is offered outside of regular school time. It is designed to strengthen foundational literacy and numeracy skills among children in Grades 3 to 5.

## ***Becoming a teacher in Zambia***

Having worked as a primary school teacher, senior teacher, zonal co-ordinator and deputy head teacher in his home town of Mufulira, Andrew knows all too well what it takes to teach foundational skills in a typical Zambian classroom.

Suppose you want to become a teacher in Zambia. In that case, you must complete a 3-year diploma at a teacher-training college. There are 14 government teacher-training colleges in Zambia - plus a growing number of private colleges. Completing your diploma won't guarantee a teaching position. You could wait for years before you are assigned to a school; many trained teachers leave the sector altogether.

## ***The challenge of teaching mathematics***

As an aspiring teacher, you might be passionate about teaching mathematics. Still, mathematics is only one of several courses you will take. There are limited opportunities to practice teaching during your formal training. The practicum takes up only a few months of a three-year programme.

Early learners in Zambia struggle to grasp number recognition, place value, and carry-over principles when learning addition and subtraction. Trained teachers must help children overcome these hurdles to become competent in mathematics. How to teach basic mathematics concepts isn't always covered during teacher training. As well as teaching the basics well, teachers need to learn how to increase the appeal of mathematics by making learning fun because children can be anxious about learning mathematics.

## ***The Catch-Up programme***

The Catch-up programme is using the Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) approach. Learners are assessed using a simple tool, assigned to groups based on their ability and then taught literacy and numeracy by teachers who have been trained in the TaRL methodology. Teachers receive ongoing mentorship and coaching.

To support teachers, the MoE selects Master Trainers from the current in-service structures supporting continuous professional development of teachers at the decentralized level. Each school sends 3 to 6 teachers for training. Groups of teachers from a zone are trained together (a zone consists of up to 15 schools).

Training typically takes about five days. Master trainers go on to train and coach school-level mentors and teachers who, in turn, deliver the programme to children at their schools.

During teaching and on a day-to-day basis, teachers can receive feedback about their teaching from their school mentors. They also receive additional support from Master Trainers during school visits. Master Trainers also act as coaches to teachers, explaining concepts to them and discussing any challenges they may be experiencing. A special feature of Catch-Up is that staff from the MoE lead in every aspect of the programme and deliver the programme. They design the materials, train teachers, monitor and mentor teachers, and participate in field visits. The MoE has played a leading role in scaling the programme. From 80 schools in 2016, the programme is currently operating in more than 4,400 schools across 8 of the ten provinces in Zambia.

## ***What has worked and what could have been done differently***

Even the most successful programmes need to respond to unexpected policy changes. Recently, the Zambian government made education free at the primary and secondary levels and recruited thousands of new teachers to work in public primary schools. How has Catch-up responded? After all, some new hires spent years outside of the teaching profession. Andrew explains that while the need to bring recently recruited teachers up to speed was clear, the cost of running additional training for recruits was substantial. In the end, new teachers received a shortened, intensive version of the training and additional upskilling from the MoE decentralised structures.

Catch-Up is leaving an important footprint on foundational learning in Zambia. It is working with the available resources while partnering with educational leaders and MoE structures at all levels to strengthen capacity. As Andrew puts it: ***"Our role is to build the capacity of structures that are already in place in the ministry."***

*Andrew Bakuluma is Education Advisor responsible for numeracy for the VVOB Catch-Up programme in Zambia.*

*Dr Linda Zuze is a Senior Foundational Learning Specialist at the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA).*

In taking stock of the successes and challenges of Catch-up, what aspect is Andrew most proud of? Andrew believes that schools on the programme recognise how important it is to use data to make decisions about instruction. This change is a huge milestone that is already bearing fruit. Because administrators analyse the results of Grade 3 assessments, they can intervene earlier. Because they can intervene earlier, children who are struggling the most, have a better chance of being taught in a way and at a level that is right for them.

### ***End Note:***

*Listen to the entire conversation about the Zambia Catch-Up programme, available in two-part ADEA podcast series.*

