



# What Does Recent Evidence Tell Us are “Smart Buys” for Improving Learning in LMICs?

Digital Development Dialogue  
25.07.2024 Seminar Summary

In spite of the large increase in education access over the past decades, many children still lack foundational literacy and numeracy. In this dialogue, **Rachel Glennerster**, Associate Professor of Economics at the University of Chicago, and **Titus Syengo**, Executive Director at Teaching at the Right Level Africa (TaRL Africa), discuss **cost-effective methods to improve these essential skills in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs)**. Building on the work of the **Global Education Evidence Advisory Panel (GEEAP)**, introduced by Glennerster, Syengo shares the practical experience of Teaching at the Right Level Africa, a Kenyan organization that implements an approach recommended as a "great buy" by GEEAP.

**In the first presentation, Rachel Glennerster explained the motivation behind the GEEAP, and shared its main findings.** Launched in 2020, this panel is an international initiative that brings together leading education researchers and practitioners from various fields and regions worldwide. Using examples from areas such as health and the environment, the panel aims to generate rigorous empirical evidence on the impact of educational interventions. The goal is to provide informed recommendations to policymakers, especially in LMICs.

The panel evaluates the effectiveness and costs of various interventions, categorizing them based on cost-effectiveness. The outcomes are measured in Learning Adjusted Years of Schooling (LAYS), representing the annual learning potential in a high-performance educational context. The interventions are sorted into five categories: i) great buys, ii) good buys, iii) promising but with limited evidence, iv) effective but relatively expensive, and v) bad buys. Targeting teaching instruction by learning level, and not grades, emerges as one of the “great buys” in education. The strategy was implemented in different settings and has been rigorously evaluated, especially in India.

**In the second part of the dialogue, Titus Syengo discussed TaRL Africa's practical experience with targeted teaching.** Baseline surveys highlighted the diverse learning levels in reading and math, indicating the methodology's potential impact. By identifying a scalable model in India, piloting and scaling it up in Africa, while conducting rigorous evaluations at each step, the efforts of TaRL Africa led to significant improvements in learning outcomes. The program involved training teachers, who then assessed and regrouped children by learning levels and provided them with tailored mentoring, coupled with adequate learning materials.

Starting in Zambia in 2015 and expanding to Kenya, Côte d'Ivoire, and Nigeria by 2022, TaRL Africa now supports over 15 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, reaching 5.5 million children. Syengo attributes the program's success to senior technical team support, ongoing qualitative and quantitative research to address challenges, and leveraging school-led initiatives. The current challenge lies in institutionalizing this approach in implementing countries.

During the Q&A session, speakers were asked about evidence of economic returns from improving children's learning. Glennerster noted that while there's a known causal link between learning levels and higher income, improved productivity is not yet proven. In rural areas, improved basic math and reading skills are expected to enhance living standards through performing better in agricultural activities, and being aware of the importance of healthcare. Other participants raised concerns about teaching children of different ages together, which might complicate creating suitable methodologies. Titus responded that the active, game-based learning experiences at TaRL usually mitigate this issue, and children enjoy interacting with each other.

Other questions revisited GEEAP's cost-effectiveness ranking introduced by Glennerster. The speakers noted that simply reducing class size has not significantly improved learning outcomes. They suspect that combining smaller classes with active and interactive learning methods might help, but this is uncertain. Conversely, providing teachers with adequate materials, while keeping their agency to decide on the methodologies and implementing interactive, context-specific learning experiences has proven very effective. Finally, Glennerster and Syengo acknowledged the political and logistical challenges of institutionalizing these programs, particularly the shortage of teachers in rural areas.

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