

Structured Pedagogy Can Really Work

A Note for Education Leaders

Having your country be recognized for a high-performing education system requires focusing on improving learning outcomes. Early primary education is when a strong foundation is laid for future learning. Failing to build that foundation means that learners will struggle to pass their end-of-primary examinations and move on to higher levels of education. Indeed, an individual's development of higher-order thinking skills and achievement of lifelong success depends on strong literacy and numeracy skills developed during early grades.¹

The disruption to schooling in 2020 caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has deprived many young learners of the structured instruction they need to develop basic skills. The extended periods of school closure may lead to a year or more of learning being lost.² Deploying research-based approaches to rapidly improve foundational learning outcomes is therefore now more important than ever. Doing so will give you an opportunity not only to recoup this past year of lost learning but to potentially build an education system that is stronger and better able to increase learning outcomes moving forward.

Structured pedagogy programs are based on a specifically designed and coherent package of investments that work together to improve classroom teaching (see Figure 1). Such programs have supported improved early grade literacy in several countries.³ Systematically implementing structured pedagogy not only leads to higher literacy and numeracy levels in early grades but can also lead to fewer dropouts, increased promotion, higher exam scores, greater teacher satisfaction, and better outcomes in later years of schooling.

What does it take to effectively implement a structured pedagogy approach at scale?

It takes focus.

Improved learning outcomes are achieved through better teaching. A focus on classroom instruction and on pedagogical quality needs to be stated, communicated, and reinforced throughout the education system. Too often, improvement strategies focus only on inputs. But what teachers do with those inputs matters much more. Defining the techniques that teachers should use in the classroom and supporting them through mutually reinforcing channels is critical. This includes better training, more effective and cheaper book purchase and distribution, more focused coaching and teacher support, and higher expectations. The focus that comes from you and other national education leaders is the key ingredient.

It takes integrated materials.

To help make it easier for teachers to adopt effective instructional methods, you need to design teaching materials based on a coherent sequence of easy-to-follow lessons.⁴ Those lessons need to provide numerous activities and exercises that allow students to practice and refine their basic skills. Meanwhile, student materials should be engaging and appropriate to grade level. Finally, and most importantly, teacher lessons and student materials need to be closely aligned with each other to simplify the teaching task.

Investments for Successful Structured Pedagogy Programs





It takes changes in teacher behavior.

Improvements in national-level outcomes will occur only if tens of thousands of teachers apply the structured pedagogy approaches on a day-to-day basis in their classrooms. Changed teacher behavior is more than a matter of having the required skills—it also means changing teachers’ attitudes and expectations regarding what it means to be a good teacher. In the context of structured pedagogy, this means understanding the lessons in the teachers’ guides, implementing them daily in classrooms, and using one’s expertise to improve the quality of instruction. These behavioral factors need to be addressed as much as, if not more than, teacher skills or qualifications. Doing so requires using the research and techniques of behavior change science—understanding perceptions, norms, and beliefs and designing communications and support interventions based on how these elements need to change.

It takes a commitment to an aligned system of training, coaching, and follow-up.

One-off trainings do not produce long-lasting teacher behavior change. Teachers must be trained, of course, but they also need to be continually supported and monitored as they apply structured pedagogy methods in their classrooms. Teacher support therefore needs to turn away from business as usual. Indeed, resources spent on training without systematic classroom-based follow-up and support are essentially wasted. It may cost more to establish regular follow-up and support structures, but the returns will be substantially greater in terms of teacher instructional change and, as a result, improved learning outcomes. Such a system of teacher support can also be used to improve teaching in other learning areas and at higher levels in the education system.

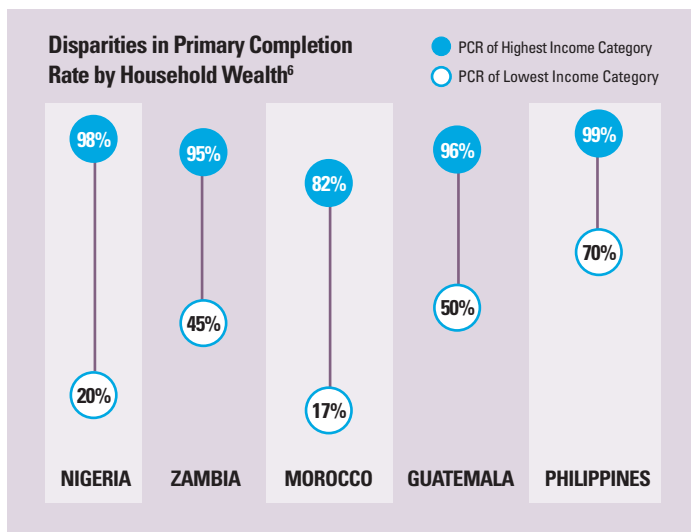
It takes concerted implementation effort.

Your education system, like most, likely has a well-thought-out sector plan covering the full range of priorities for improvement and investment. Achieving the outcomes of such a plan requires implementation capacity—and this is often where efforts run aground. Trying to implement complex reforms across all educational levels and concerns is daunting for even the best-functioning systems. Research on high-performing education systems points to the importance of middle levels of management. Tight management across the system is essential, and sustained attention needs to be focused on a small number of specific priorities. For structured pedagogy, those key priorities are instructional practice, the daily use of materials, and a teacher support system. These priority activities need to be sustained long enough for teachers to fully adopt the desired practices and begin to see the results of their efforts. Rapid monitoring of teacher uptake and student outcomes helps uncover evidence of effectiveness, which can be used to reinforce and re-emphasize the desired change.⁵

SENIOR EDUCATION LEADERS IN SOBRAL, BRAZIL, USED STRUCTURED PEDAGOGY METHODS TO MOVE FROM 1366TH PLACE IN THE COUNTRY TO 1ST PLACE, DESPITE THE CITY’S HIGH POVERTY LEVELS. KEY TO THE LEADERS’ SUCCESS WAS SETTING CLEAR GOALS AND TARGETS AND HOLDING THE SYSTEM ACCOUNTABLE FOR MEETING THEM.

It takes additional effort to overcome disadvantage and inequity.

All education systems are challenged to address the inequities and disadvantages that are prevalent in society at large. When implementing structured pedagogy, you should recognize that some school communities will inevitably struggle more than others to improve. As a first step, it is critical to identify such districts and schools and offer them targeted additional help. For example, school support officers can visit struggling schools more frequently; school heads can observe and advise struggling teachers more regularly; and additional training can be organized for teachers who need further skill reinforcement. The package of support for disadvantaged parts of the country should be designed and prepared ahead of time and then applied where needs are revealed to be greatest.





The Bigger Picture

You may be asking, “But if I put all my energy into implementing structured pedagogy to improve foundational skills, how does that benefit the rest of the primary cycle, to say nothing of other levels of education?” Improved literacy and numeracy outcomes help learners succeed in other subjects, and a more effective school support system can be used to improve the quality of the entire system. Your system’s capacity to design high-quality materials, to distribute them cheaply throughout the country, to focus on improving teaching, and to directly support teachers and schools can be capitalized on to the benefit of other subjects and grade levels (see text box on previous page). Demonstrating rapid improvement in foundation skills and then applying that acquired capacity to the rest of the system would garner broad public support and make your system a model for other countries. Brazil, Mexico, and Kenya have recently been touted as examples of how structured pedagogy programs can effectively support the education system more broadly.⁷

Questions for Your Partners

Structured pedagogy has shown substantial effects and has been identified by the World Bank and the UK’s Foreign, Commonwealth Development Office as one of the “Smart Buys” for improving learning in low- and middle-income countries.⁸ Education leaders are faced not only with the complex task of managing their system, as described above, but also with working with development partners to implement effective structured pedagogy programs. In this regard, you are no doubt well aware that not all partners are the same. The list below contains questions you can ask to make sure that potential partners offer what is best for your country:

- We face constrained resources due to COVID-19. Why should structured pedagogy be a priority when resources are limited?
- While I understand that it may take additional resources to effectively implement structured pedagogy, can you show evidence of the cost-effectiveness of your proposed approach?
- What if our teachers resist such a structured approach? How will the program be made acceptable to them? What is in it for them?
- How much and what kind of capacity building will ensure that our lower primary literacy and numeracy system can be effective beyond the duration of donor support? What will enable us to build on our success in lower primary to improve other levels of our system?

THE WAY FORWARD

We recommend carefully analyzing partners’ responses to these questions as you consider implementing a structured pedagogy program. While such programs have shown significant results at the regional and, in some cases, national levels, their impact depends heavily on the quality of implementation and their meaningful integration into the education system. We also encourage you to have senior leaders review the structured pedagogy guidance on key elements of implementation (see links below) so that relevant lessons can be applied to your country’s unique context. With a focus on outcomes and with clear direction from the top, it is possible to improve the quality of education in ways that support the entire education system and contribute to improved learning outcomes.

RESOURCES

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the country’s increased focus on foundational literacy and numeracy: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y9JA7VK0e8o&feature=youtu.be&ab_channel=CentralSquareFoundation

Lant Pritchett on learning as a priority (5-minute video): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wUehLnWdtxQ>

Luis Crouch on three cases of system alignment: <https://riseprogramme.org/publications/systems-implications-core-instructional-support-lessons-sobral-brazil-puebla-mexico>

Complete Series of Structured Pedagogy How-To Guides: <https://scienceofteaching.s3.eu-west-3.amazonaws.com/index.html>

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- 1 Margaret Kern and Howard Friedman, “Early Educational Milestones as Predictors of Lifelong Academic Achievement, Midlife Adjustment, and Longevity,” *Journal of Applied Psychology* 30, no. 4 (2008): 419–430.
- 2 Shiraz Chakera, Deborah Haffner, and Elizabeth Harrop, “Structured Pedagogy: For Real-Time Equitable Improvements in Learning Outcomes,” United Nations Children’s Fund Eastern and Southern Africa Working Paper, Nairobi, June 2020. <https://www.unicef.org/esa/media/7511/file/ESA-Structured-Pedagogy-2020.pdf>
- 3 Global Education Evidence Advisory Panel, *Cost-Effective Approaches to Improve Global Learning* (October 2020). <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/719211603835247448/pdf/Cost-Effective-Approaches-to-Improve-Global-Learning-What-Does-Recent-Evidence-Tell-Us-Are-Smart-Buys-for-Improving-Learning-in-Low-and-Middle-Income-Countries.pdf>
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Luis Crouch, “Systems Implications for Core Instructional Support Lessons from Sobral (Brazil), Puebla (Mexico), and Kenya,” RISE Insight Series, 2020/020, July 8, 2020. <https://riseprogramme.org/publications/systems-implications-core-instructional-support-lessons-sobral-brazil-puebla-mexico>
- 6 UNESCO, Education for All Global Monitoring Report, “World Inequality Database on Education.” <https://www.education-inequalities.org>
- 7 Crouch, “Systems Implications,” 2020.
- 8 Global Education Evidence Advisory Panel, *Cost-Effective Approaches*, 2020.