



The transformational power of **foundational** **learning** is within reach

Image: Primary school in Morogoro, Tanzania, credit: Tom Maguire, RESULTS UK

Foundational learning is the right of every child

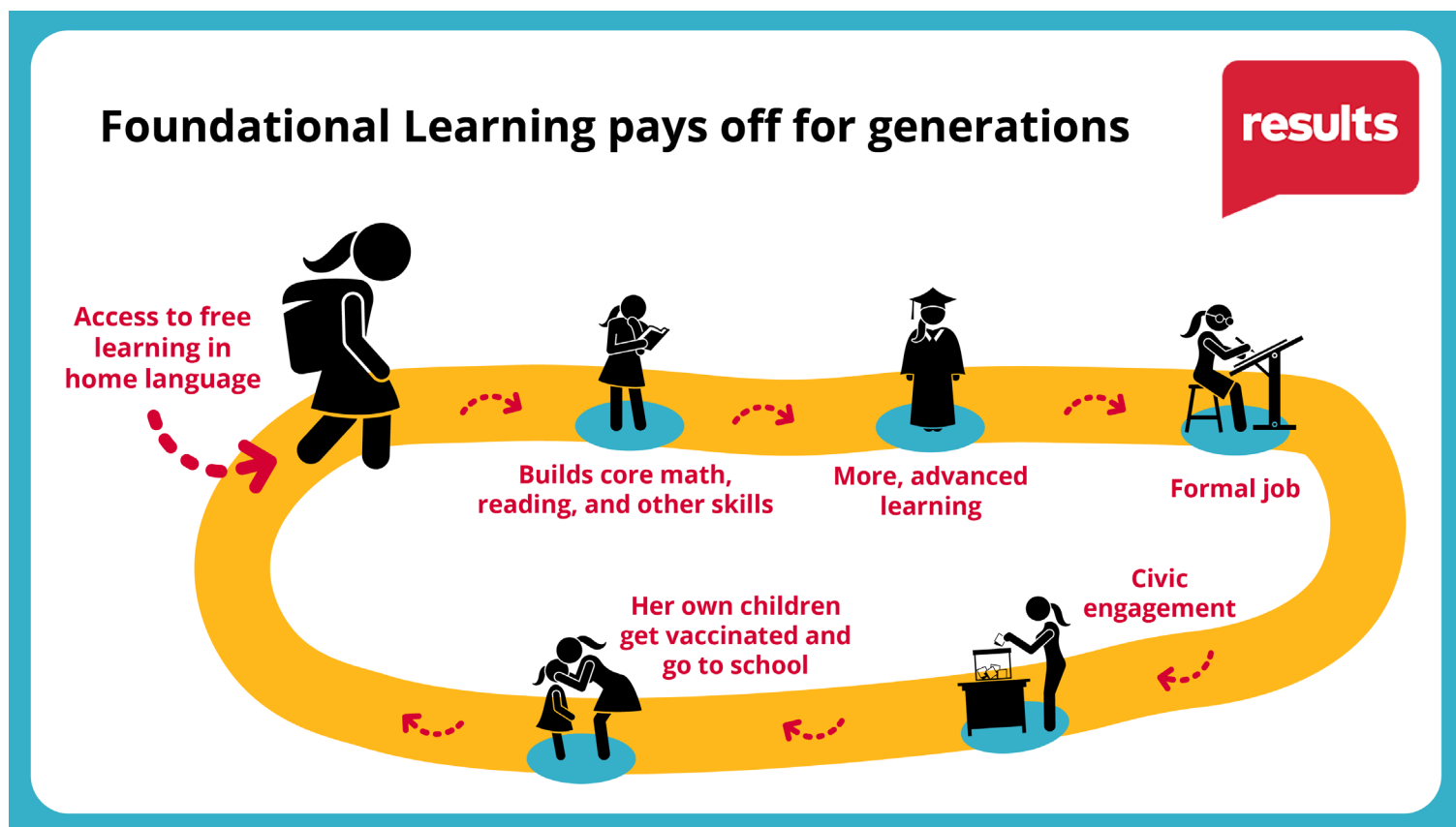
There are few experiences that are truly universal, touching every human life, but one of those is learning. A mastery of foundational literacy, numeracy, social skills, and more is part of what got you to where you are today, and it is what we need to deliver for every child.

Foundational learning is the “basic literacy, numeracy, and transferable skills, that are the building blocks for a life of learning.” In other words, a child must learn how to add and subtract before she does algebra and must learn how to sound out letters before reading a book.

Foundational learning should occur in the primary grades (ages 5-11) for good reason. At this age, the brain prunes or removes its least-used synaptic pathways, making this the “use it or lose it”

phase of learning. Foundational learning wires children's brains for increasingly complex academic skills and concepts. Effective early instruction in foundational literacy and numeracy also helps children gain self-confidence, persistence, and other learning skills that enable them to succeed throughout their education.

Mastering foundational skills benefits not only the individual child but society overall. Countries where kids have the opportunity to master basic literacy and math see increased annual economic growth.ⁱⁱ Individual kids who get access to this learning have better chances of completing secondary school and higher education, securing a job in the formal labor market, being engaged members of the community, and parenting future generations who are more likely to survive past age 5 and attend school.ⁱⁱⁱ



The value of quality, responsive foundational learning is clear, but what does it look like? The Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) program supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) offers helpful examples happening in countries like India, Zambia, and Ghana (see photo on page 4).^{iv} TaRL is a method of instruction coupled with teacher training and materials that organizes classrooms into student groups (called “clubs”) by literacy level. Teachers facilitate interactive and collaborative learning with culturally-specific, developmentally-appropriate materials to inspire and grow students’ literacy skills based on their needs. Rather than a focus on memorizing, TaRL customizes instruction and engages children. Standardized assessment shows children taught through TaRL methods achieve higher rates of literacy, even in regions with education infrastructure challenges.^v

Global crises and systemic inequities have created dire learning poverty

But what happens when children do not have access to safe, responsive learning opportunities like those facilitated by TaRL? When they do not have these experiences by age 10, this is what the World Bank calls learning poverty.^{vi} Countries and regions grappling with the destructive legacies of colonialism and enslavement often experience outsized rates of learning poverty. Global conflict and environmental catastrophes (e.g., earthquakes, drought) can worsen learning poverty by blocking access to schooling and displacing families. In some countries learning poverty can be as high as 98 percent.^{vii} Marginalized groups such as children with disabilities, girls, children from minoritized ethnic/linguistic groups, and children who have been displaced experience the greatest barriers in accessing their right to foundational learning.

The COVID-19 pandemic has slowed progress on foundational learning, creating even more urgency to act. Before the pandemic, an estimated 57 percent of children in low- and middle-income countries lived in learning poverty—now that number is up to 70 percent.^{viii} Without a drastic reversal, the pandemic-impacted generation will lose an estimated \$21 trillion in lifetime earnings.^{ix} That's the equivalent of 17 percent of global Gross Domestic Product (GDP). We all have a stake in foundational learning equity.

The good news is that together we know how to address learning poverty

Prior to the pandemic and even in its midst, the U.S. government and its global partners have collaborated in locally-led efforts that increase access to quality basic education. Backed by strong bipartisan congressional support, USAID leads the U.S. government's foundational learning efforts in over 50 priority countries.^x In 2021 alone, USAID partners reached 33.4 million learners^{xi} through programs like the Tusome Early Grade Reading program^{xii} in Kenya that supports the Ministry of Education to administer country-wide high quality literacy curriculum.

Multilateral partnerships like the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) are also crucial. GPE is a global fund that brings together governments, civil society organizations, the private sector, and youth focused on ensuring every child has access to a quality education. GPE's inclusive model supports priority countries to establish sustainable, well-funded education infrastructure. U.S. support for GPE has contributed to an additional 160 million children in school, with 97 percent of sector plans focused on students from marginalized groups.^{xiii}

We have the key tools and partnerships at hand, but there is far more needed – more focus on local leadership, more investment, more accessible quality programs, and better learning infrastructure to support all of it. We also need the tools to measure and track quality and accessibility. Through USAID's bilateral education work and international partnerships like GPE, we know how to fulfill every child's right to learn, we just need the smart investments and decisive action to deliver for every child. By fully funding USAID's basic education programs and building on its strong foundational learning policies, the U.S. can help harness the transformational power of foundational learning.

Teaching at the Right Level in action

"Kokola Acka Hermann, a school principal in Côte d'Ivoire supports the implementation of the country's TaRL intervention Programme d'Enseignement Ciblé (PEC) in her school. Hermann highlights how the program has improved learners' foundational skills in French and maths through quality delivery.

'I have seen progress, especially in maths. Children who were at beginner level moved on to subtraction level at the end of the year, which was really impressive,' said Kokola."

Source: "The TaRL approach invests in systems and educators to strengthen children's foundational skills," LinkedIn, <https://bit.ly/3Mopkx3>



A TaRL numeracy activity in Côte d'Ivoire. Photo: TaRL Africa

Endnotes

ⁱ The urgent need to focus on foundational skills. (2021, November 4). Blogs.worldbank.org. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/education/urgent-need-focus-foundational-skills#:~:text=Foundational%20learning%20is%20exactly%20what%20it%20sounds%20like>

ⁱⁱ Hanushek, E. A., & Woessmann, L. (2009). Do Better Schools Lead to More Growth? Cognitive Skills, Economic Outcomes, and Causation [Review of Do Better Schools Lead to More Growth? Cognitive Skills, Economic Outcomes, and Causation]. In https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w14633/w14633.pdf. National Bureau of Economic Research.

ⁱⁱⁱ (2013). *Education transforms lives* [Review of *Education transforms lives*]. UNESCO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000223115>

^{iv} *Teaching at the Right Level - Foundational skills for a better future*. (n.d.). Teachingattherightlevel.org. Retrieved May 17, 2023, from <https://teachingattherightlevel.org/>

^v *Education programs - Evidence based*. (n.d.). Teachingattherightlevel.org. Retrieved May 17, 2023, from <https://teachingattherightlevel.org/evidence/>

^{vi} World Bank. (2021). *Learning Poverty is a combined measure of schooling and learning*. World Bank. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/education/brief/what-is-learning-poverty>

^{vii} (2022). *The State of Global Learning Poverty: 2022 Update* [Review of *The State of Global Learning Poverty: 2022 Update*]. UNICEF. <https://www.unicef.org/media/122921/file/StateofLearningPoverty2022.pdf>

^{viii} Azevedo, J. P. W. de, Rogers, F. H., Ahlgren, S. E., Cloutier, M.-H., Chakroun, B., Chang, G.-C., Mizunoya, S., Reuge, N. J., Brossard, M., & Bergmann, J. L. (2021). *The State of the Global Education Crisis : A Path to Recovery* [Review of *The State of the Global Education Crisis : A Path to Recovery*]. 1. World Bank Group. <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/416991638768297704/the-state-of-the-global-education-crisis-a-path-to-recovery>

^{ix} The World Bank. (2018). *Education*. World Bank. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/education/overview>

^x (2019). *USAID Education: Early learning and foundational skills* [Review of *USAID Education: Early learning and foundational skills*]. USAID. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED609714.pdf>

^{xi} *US Government Strategy on International Basic Education, FY 2021 | Reports to Congress*. (2023, January 18). U.S. Agency for International Development. <https://www.usaid.gov/reports/international-basic-education-strategy/fy-2021>

^{xii} *Tusome: A Foundation for Strong Education Systems | Kenya*. (2022, December 12). U.S. Agency for International Development. <https://www.usaid.gov/kenya/news/tusome-foundation-strong-education-systems#:~:text=USAID%20Tusome%20Early%20Grade%20Reading%20is%20a%20flagship>

^{xiii} GPE Education Data and Results in Developing Countries. (n.d.). www.globalpartnership.org/results/gpe-impact