

Addressing Learning Poverty in Africa: Policies and Implementation

Memory Rumbidzai V. Mandikiana (DBA & Ph.D.), Leanne Tsungai Mutasa (BSW, CT University)

Peace, Governance, Inclusion, and Social Work Independent Researchers

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ABSTRACT

Learning poverty, commonly defined as the inability of a child to read and understand a simple text by age 10, has emerged as one of the most consequential development challenges facing Africa. Although the continent expanded access to schooling between 2000 and 2024, large proportions of children still complete the early grades without mastering foundational literacy and numeracy (UNESCO et al., 2024; UNICEF, 2021). The 2025 UNESCO spotlight report estimated that only 10.8% of children in Africa achieve the minimum proficiency level in reading and mathematics by the end of primary school, underscoring the depth of the continent's learning poverty crisis (UNESCO, 2025a). In its communiqué of November 25, 2024, the African Union similarly stated that 9 out of 10 learners in Africa aged 10 are unable to read a simple text or undertake basic mathematical tasks, describing this as a continental learning poverty emergency (African Union, 2024b).

This manuscript consolidates the policy and implementation literature on learning poverty in Africa and develops an integrated argument about why progress has been uneven. Drawing on evidence from multilateral organizations, peer-reviewed studies, and implementation reports, the paper examines the interaction of pedagogy, governance, language of instruction, teacher management, financing, social and emotional learning, gender-responsive and inclusive pedagogy, pandemics and disease shocks, and digital innovation. It argues that the most promising reforms are those that combine structured pedagogy, targeted instruction, teacher coaching, adaptive teaching, mother tongue-based multilingual education, and safe, inclusive learning environments with sustained political commitment, domestic financing, and monitoring systems that support implementation fidelity (Piper et al., 2018; UNESCO, 2025a; UNESCO et al., 2024).

The paper further contends that the causes of learning poverty are systemic rather than merely classroom-level: weak teacher preparation, inequitable deployment, under-resourced schools, linguistic mismatch, fragile accountability systems, and insufficient attention to the economic, socio-cultural, health, and religious realities shaping participation and learning jointly reproduce low outcomes (UNESCO et al., 2024; UNICEF, 2021). Comparative discussion of reform trajectories in Kenya, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, and broader continental initiatives illustrates that technically sound programmes often falter when they are not institutionalised through teacher education, curriculum alignment, school leadership, community engagement, and reliable public financing. The manuscript concludes by outlining a policy agenda for reducing learning poverty in Africa that prioritises early-grade foundational learning, strengthens instructional leadership, embeds inclusion and safeguarding, and cautiously harnesses digital and generative artificial intelligence tools in ways that augment rather than displace teachers.

Keywords: learning poverty, foundational learning, Africa, pandemics, structured pedagogy, multilingual education, inclusive education

INTRODUCTION

The expansion of school participation across Africa is one of the major social policy achievements of the last generation. Public investment, the abolition of school fees in many systems, demographic pressure, donor support, and national commitments under continental and global agendas have brought millions of children into classrooms (UNICEF, 2021). Yet the educational promise of mass access has not translated into commensurate gains in learning. The contemporary education debate in Africa is therefore defined less by whether children are

enrolled and more by whether they are learning. The concept of learning poverty has become central to this debate because it captures the cumulative effects of weak foundational learning in a single, policy-relevant indicator: whether a child can read and understand a simple text by age 10 (World Bank, 2024). This indicator has gained traction because it links early classroom processes to longer-term trajectories in schooling, labour market participation, social inclusion, and national productivity.

African and global reporting published in 2024 and 2025 underscores the magnitude of the crisis. The 2024 UNESCO-ADEA-African Union spotlight report warned that learning levels remain alarmingly low across the continent, while the 2025 UNESCO spotlight report concluded that only 10.8% of children achieve the minimum proficiency level in reading and mathematics by the end of primary school (UNESCO, 2025a; UNESCO et al., 2024). In its communiqué issued on November 25, 2024, the African Union stated that 9 out of 10 learners in Africa aged 10 are unable to read a simple text or undertake basic mathematical tasks (African Union, 2024b). UNESCO's 2025 Africa-focused spotlight further highlights leadership, policy coherence, and implementation as decisive constraints on progress (UNESCO, 2025a). These diagnoses align with the wider global turn from "schooling" to "learning," in which policy attention has shifted from educational access alone to the quality of instructional interactions, the relevance of curricula, and the capacity of systems to ensure that foundational skills are acquired early enough to support later learning (UNESCO et al., 2024; UNICEF, 2021).

Conceptual and Methodological Framing

This manuscript is a scholarly synthesis rather than a primary empirical study. It draws together peer-reviewed literature, policy reports, continental strategy documents, and implementation evidence from African countries to examine how learning poverty is being addressed in policy and practice. The analysis is guided by three complementary lenses:

Human Capital Lenses: Foundational literacy and numeracy are economically consequential because later years of schooling yield lower returns when children fail to master basic skills early (UNICEF, 2021; World Bank, 2024).

Capabilities Approach Lenses: Attention shifts from formal participation to the substantive freedom to learn, thereby foregrounding the role of equity, inclusion, disability, gender, safety, and child protection in shaping learning opportunities (UNESCO et al., 2024; UNICEF, 2021).

Implementation Science Lenses: Institutional arrangements, professional capacity, financing, and accountability determine whether reforms that are effective in pilot settings can be sustained at scale (Piper et al., 2018; UNESCO, 2025a).

Methodologically, the manuscript privileges sources published between 2021 and 2026 while also drawing selectively on earlier work that remains foundational to current reform debates.

Research Questions

1. What are the main structural, pedagogical, social, and contextual drivers of learning poverty in Africa?
2. Which policy and instructional responses show the strongest promise for reducing learning poverty across African education systems?
3. How do pandemics, displacement, and implementation constraints shape the effectiveness of foundational learning reforms in Africa?

The manuscript answers these questions by showing, first, that learning poverty in Africa is driven by interacting factors that include weak foundational pedagogy, language-of-instruction mismatch, unequal teacher deployment, poverty, exclusion, conflict, and health-related disruptions. Second, it argues that the strongest policy responses combine structured pedagogy, targeted instruction, multilingual education, differentiated teaching, social and emotional learning, and gender-responsive and inclusive pedagogy with reliable financing,

instructional leadership, and community engagement. Third, it demonstrates that pandemics and displacement deepen learning poverty by interrupting schooling, reducing access to learning materials and support services, and exposing vulnerable learners to heightened psychosocial and material deprivation, while weak implementation systems often limit the effectiveness of otherwise sound reforms.

The Scale and Contours of Learning Poverty in Africa

Learning poverty in Africa is severe, persistent, and highly unequal. The available evidence suggests not only low average performance but also profound disparities across countries, between urban and rural locations, and among children differentiated by poverty, gender, disability, language background, and exposure to conflict or climate stress (UNESCO et al., 2024; UNICEF, 2021). The 2024 UNESCO-ADEA-African Union spotlight report on foundational learning in Africa warned that learning levels remain alarmingly low across the continent, and the 2025 follow-up report concluded that only 10.8% of children achieve minimum proficiency in reading and mathematics by the end of primary school (UNESCO, 2025a; UNESCO et al., 2024). The African Union’s communiqué of November 25, 2024, launching the *End Learning Poverty for All in Africa* campaign, likewise framed the crisis as one affecting nine out of ten learners by age 10 in many settings (African Union, 2024b). These estimates vary in method and scope, but together they indicate a persistent failure to ensure minimum learning despite expanded participation in schooling.

The drivers of this crisis are cumulative and mutually reinforcing. Weak school readiness, overcrowded classrooms, teacher shortages, limited instructional materials, low time-on-task, curriculum overload, and inconsistent use of assessment all undermine early literacy and numeracy acquisition (UNESCO et al., 2024; UNESCO IICBA, 2024). In many contexts, the first years of schooling are dominated by rote routines, copying exercises, and teacher-centred recitation that provide insufficient practice in decoding, vocabulary, comprehension, and basic mathematical reasoning. These challenges are compounded where teachers themselves have not received strong preparation in foundational pedagogy, where supervision focuses on administrative compliance rather than instructional support, and where school leadership lacks the authority or capability to prioritize learning recovery (UNESCO, 2025a). The result is a system in which many children progress through grades without acquiring the skills required to benefit from subsequent instruction.

Exogenous shocks have intensified these structural problems. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted schooling across the continent between March 2020 and mid-2022, exposing the fragility of learning continuity systems, especially where access to electricity, devices, connectivity, and educational broadcasting was limited (UNICEF, 2021). Throughout 2024 and 2025, severe climate events including droughts, flooding, food insecurity, conflict, and displacement continued to interrupt attendance and heighten the opportunity costs of schooling for vulnerable households. UNICEF’s 2025 reporting from Zimbabwe, for example, links drought-induced hardship and multidimensional child poverty to rising barriers to sustained school participation and quality learning, particularly in rural areas and among children with disabilities (UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2025a, 2025b). Such shocks do not create learning poverty from scratch; rather, they magnify weak system capacity and deepen pre-existing inequalities.

Table 1: Macro and Micro-Level Indicators of Learning Poverty and Contextual Shocks

Indicator	Metric / Metric Value	Date / Period of Measurement	Strategic Alignment & Implication
Continental Proficiency Failure	10.8% of children achieve minimum proficiency in reading and mathematics	UNESCO Spotlight Report (2025)	Confirms the severe scale of foundational learning failure across primary schools at a macro level.
Continental Learning Emergency	9 out of 10 learners aged 10 unable to read a simple text or do basic mathematics	African Union Communiqué (November 25, 2024)	Demonstrates high-level political recognition of the

			learning poverty crisis as an emergency.
Micro-Level Pandemic Disruption	10% sample (230 respondents) out of 2,304 children aged 12–17 years	Study conducted April 2020 – February 2021 (Mandikiana et al., 2021)	Provides localized empirical evidence of how public health shutdowns halt learning in fragile contexts.
Displaced Population Vulnerability	14,750 total refugees; 2,304 children aged 12–17 years	UNHCR Population Statistics (January 31, 2021)	Illustrates the scale of structural vulnerability in camp-based, marginalized educational environments.
Multidimensional Child Poverty	61% of children experiencing multidimensional deprivation	UNICEF Zimbabwe Annual Report 2024 (Published February 2025)	Connects household socio-economic deprivation to erratic school attendance and weak learning retention.
Climate and Food Insecurity Shocks	6 million people expected to be food insecure during the lean season	OCHA Drought Flash Appeal (May 2024)	Illustrates how macro-climate crises compound learning poverty via nutritional deficits and absenteeism.

Figure 1 below illustrates Macro vs. Micro Foundational Learning Deprivation Profile

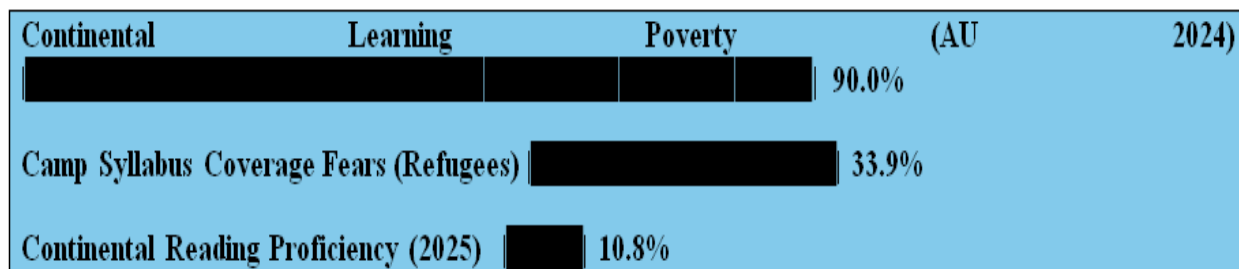


Figure 1: Macro vs. Micro Foundational Learning Deprivation Profile

Language of Instruction and the Reproduction of Learning Poverty

One of the most important and still under-addressed determinants of learning poverty in Africa is the mismatch between the language of instruction used in school and the language children speak and understand at home. The World Bank (2021) argues that poor language-of-instruction policy harms learning, access, inclusion, and cost-effectiveness, while UNESCO's multilingual education guidance published in January 2025 stresses that children learn best when initial literacy instruction begins in a language they understand (UNESCO, 2025b).

UNESCO (2025c) further notes that, in Africa, children taught in a familiar language are substantially more likely to read with understanding by the end of primary school and recommends sustained mother tongue-based multilingual education rather than an abrupt transition to dominant national or colonial languages. Language policy is therefore not a peripheral cultural issue; it is central to equitable foundational learning.

Economic, Socio-cultural, and Religious Contexts

Strategies to end learning poverty in Africa must take seriously the economic, socio-cultural, and religious contexts that shape educational participation and classroom engagement. Poverty affects attendance, concentration, and time available for study, especially where children combine schooling with household labour, care work, or income-generating activities (UNICEF, 2021). Socio-cultural norms can influence language use,

gender roles, expectations about child work, and beliefs about the value of schooling, while religious institutions and leaders may either facilitate or hinder reform depending on whether programs are seen as culturally legitimate and socially protective.

UNESCO's inclusion framework explicitly identifies economic condition, language, gender, religion, and location as factors that can structure educational exclusion (UNESCO, 2024a). In many African settings, effective policy therefore requires community dialogue, partnerships with local leaders, social protection for poor households, and culturally responsive communication that explains why foundational learning matters for both girls and boys. Where reforms ignore these realities, interventions may be technically sound yet socially fragile. Where they engage them constructively, reforms are more likely to secure attendance, parental trust, and continuity of learning.

Pandemics, Disease Outbreaks, and the Reproduction of Learning Poverty

Pandemics and disease outbreaks contribute directly to learning poverty in Africa by interrupting schooling, weakening household livelihoods, reducing instructional time, and exposing already-marginalised learners to heightened psychosocial stress, protection risks, and nutritional deprivation. The COVID-19 pandemic, declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020, generated continent-wide school closures and exposed the fragility of learning continuity systems, especially in contexts where electricity, digital devices, radio coverage, and internet connectivity were limited. In Zimbabwe, schools were closed on March 24, 2020, and the first national lockdown began on March 30, 2020, for an initial 21-day period under Statutory Instrument 83 of 2020. These measures were vital public-health responses, but they also sharply reduced contact time between teachers and learners, particularly in poor, rural, and displaced communities with limited access to remote learning alternatives. UNICEF and African Union reporting released between 2024 and 2025 continued to note that the after-effects of COVID-19, together with later public health emergencies such as cholera and drought-linked disease risks, have slowed learning recovery and deepened realities of foundational literacy and numeracy deprivation (African Union, 2024b; UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2025a).

Mandikiana, Awasthi, and Dambudzo's (2021) study of Tongogara Refugee Camp in Zimbabwe provides a concrete case of how pandemics intensify learning poverty under conditions of displacement. Their mixed-methods study, conducted between April 2020 and February 2021, drew on a 10% sample of 230 respondents from a population of 2,304 children aged 12–17 years recorded in UNHCR's January 2021 population statistics for the camp. The study found that COVID-19 worsened already existing vulnerabilities by limiting access to formal learning, child protection services, play, and psychosocial support. It reported that schools closed on March 24, 2020, disrupted examinations, revision lessons, and ordinary routines of learning, while children in the camp had very limited access to alternative learning options such as radio, television, online platforms, or printed take-home materials.

The same study documented that 33.9% of respondents feared that they would not cover the expected syllabus during school closures, 16.2% indicated that they needed learning materials during the lockdown period, 15.1% identified the need for entertainment and safe play, and 11.5% reported needing access to the internet. The article therefore strengthens the manuscript's argument that pandemics do not merely pause schooling; they reproduce and deepen learning poverty by compounding pre-existing disadvantages in fragile, low-resource, and displaced settings (Mandikiana et al., 2021). Figure 2 below illustrates this argument:

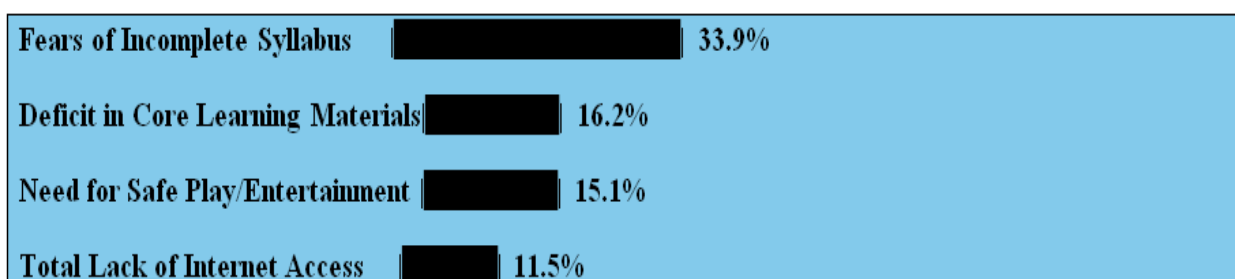


Figure 2: [Tongogara Refugee Camp Pandemic Vulnerability Metrics (Mandikiana et al., 2021)]

Evidence from Zimbabwe reinforces the importance of community legitimacy and stakeholder engagement in sustaining educational quality. Mandikiana and Murairwa's (2022) study of mission boarding schools in Mutasa District found that parents continued to value academic achievement and moral formation, but they also expressed concern about deteriorating infrastructure, weak stakeholder synergies, limited accountability, poor governance, and slow adoption of blended learning during and after the COVID-19 period. Although the study focused on secondary institutions, its implications are directly relevant to the early-grade learning poverty debate: reforms are more likely to be sustained when schools maintain active trust with families, communicate transparently with stakeholders, and align quality improvement with local expectations and shifting technological conditions.

Policy Responses to Learning Poverty

African governments and their development partners have responded to learning poverty through a growing repertoire of reforms, several of which now enjoy a strong evidence base. Among the most influential are structured pedagogy, targeted instruction approaches such as Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL), curriculum and assessment reforms focused on foundational competencies, expanded use of mother tongue-based multilingual education, teacher professional development, social and emotional learning, gender-responsive and inclusive pedagogy, school leadership strengthening, and the use of digital systems for instructional support and monitoring (African Union, 2025a; UNESCO, 2025a; UNICEF, 2024). At the continental level, these approaches increasingly sit within broader strategic frameworks and campaigns, including the African Union's foundational literacy and numeracy agenda, the *End Learning Poverty for All in Africa* campaign, and efforts to harmonise monitoring through continental frameworks and indicators (African Union, 2024b, 2025b).

Structured Pedagogy

Structured pedagogy has become one of the most widely endorsed responses to low foundational learning. Rather than leaving lesson design entirely to under-supported teachers, structured pedagogy packages provide sequenced lesson plans, pupil books, teachers' guides, formative assessment tools, and coaching arrangements that aim to improve the consistency and quality of classroom instruction.

Evidence from Kenya's Tusome program is particularly influential. Analyses of Tusome's national scale-up show that the program clarified instructional expectations, distributed core materials at scale, and created functional feedback loops that helped county-level support structures focus more directly on teaching and learning (Piper et al., 2018). Its significance lies not only in improved early reading outcomes but in its demonstration that reforms can be implemented nationally when they are operationally simple, politically supported, and embedded in government systems. Structured pedagogy also matters in low-capacity contexts because it can reduce variation in instructional quality across classrooms while still leaving room for teachers to adapt examples, pacing, and questioning to learner needs.

Teaching at the Right Level

Teaching at the Right Level addresses one of the core design flaws in conventional schooling: the rigid assumption that children in the same grade are at roughly similar levels of academic preparedness. In contexts of severe learning poverty, that assumption is routinely false. TaRL responds by assessing learners' actual skill levels and grouping them for targeted instruction based on pedagogical need rather than age or nominal grade level (Pratham, 2020, 2026).

Although the model originated outside Africa, it has been adapted across multiple African settings and has been recognized in continental discussions as a highly scalable approach to foundational learning (African Union, 2025a). The pedagogical logic is powerful because it narrows the gap between what the curriculum demands and what children are currently able to do. However, its operational effectiveness depends on practical assessment routines, thorough teacher training, and institutional acceptance of temporary remediation within rigid grade structures.

At the continental level, targeted instruction is increasingly treated as one of the major scalable solutions for ending learning poverty. The African Union's 2025 validation workshop on scalable foundational literacy and numeracy practices explicitly highlighted targeted instruction by learning level among the approaches with cross-border promise for adaptation across member states (African Union, 2025a). This recognition is important because it suggests a shift from isolated pilot projects to structured peer learning around implementation models that can be systematically integrated into national sector plans.

Both structured pedagogy and TaRL depend on an enabling ecosystem of coaching, formative assessment, and leadership. Programs that simply distribute scripts or regroup learners without strengthening support routines often underperform. The literature therefore increasingly emphasizes continuous professional development, communities of practice, school-level instructional leadership, and routine use of learning data as the mechanisms through which technical designs become sustained changes in classroom behaviour.

Adaptive and Differentiated Teaching

Adaptive or differentiated teaching is an essential strategy for ending learning poverty because classrooms in Africa are characterised by wide variation in language proficiency, prior exposure to print, school readiness, disability status, and progression through the curriculum. Differentiated teaching involves adjusting content, pace, instructional processes, grouping arrangements, and modes of participation to accommodate this diversity rather than treating it as a deviation from the norm (UNICEF, 2024; UNICEF Innocenti, 2026a). This approach is closely related to targeted instruction, but it extends beyond remedial grouping by asking teachers to routinely vary support, scaffold tasks, and create multiple pathways to success inside ordinary lessons.

In overcrowded and resource-constrained classrooms, differentiation need not imply individual lesson plans for every learner; it can involve simple but powerful practices such as flexible grouping, tiered questions, peer support, multimodal instruction, and additional time or assistive materials for learners who need them. From a policy perspective, differentiated teaching should be embedded in teacher education, coaching, lesson planning tools, and assessment systems so that heterogeneity is treated as the normal condition of schooling rather than as a problem external to the curriculum.

Social and Emotional Learning

Social and emotional learning (SEL) should be recognized as a core part of the foundational learning agenda rather than treated as an optional add-on. UNESCO's 2025 foundational learning summary states explicitly that foundational skills encompass literacy, numeracy, and social-emotional skills, while UNESCO's 2024 policy guide on mainstreaming SEL argues that such competencies improve academic achievement, reduce dropout rates, and strengthen well-being and classroom relationships (UNESCO, 2024b, 2025a).

This point is especially relevant in African contexts marked by poverty, displacement, violence, and environmental stress, where learners may experience intense anxiety, grief, or instability that interferes with concentration and persistence. SEL contributes to learning poverty reduction by improving self-regulation, attention, cooperation, and classroom climate- conditions that support reading and mathematics instruction. For policy, the implication is that teacher development must include practical strategies for positive classroom management, relationship building, psychosocial support, and routines that help children feel safe, engaged, and ready to learn. SEL is not a substitute for explicit instruction in literacy and numeracy; it is part of the enabling architecture that allows such instruction to succeed consistently.

Gender-Responsive and Inclusive Pedagogy

Gender-Responsive and Inclusive Pedagogy (GRIP), sometimes framed in earlier African practice as Gender-Responsive Pedagogy (GRP), is also central to efforts to reduce learning poverty. The Fawe and UNICEF toolkit on gender-responsive pedagogy argues that many classroom routines across sub-Saharan Africa reproduce unequal participation because they are shaped by patriarchal norms, gender stereotypes, and insufficient sensitivity to the different constraints girls and boys face in school (UNICEF, 2020). Gender-transformative education literature similarly emphasizes that parity in enrolment is not enough if daily teaching

practices, school safety, and expectations continue to silence girls, normalize harassment, or police rigid gender roles (UNICEF, 2021b).

GRIP matters for learning poverty because foundational learning is directly shaped by who gets called on, who receives feedback, whose mistakes are tolerated, whose attendance is interrupted by domestic care burdens or menstruation-related barriers, and whether classrooms feel safe and dignified. A GRIP approach therefore includes gender-aware lesson planning, inclusive language, equitable participation strategies, disability-sensitive materials, prevention of harassment, support for menstrual health and hygiene, and critical reflection on how classroom interaction may exclude some learners. In contexts where gender, disability, poverty, and language intersect, inclusive pedagogy is not a separate equity agenda; it is a direct determinant of whether children acquire foundational skills.

Zimbabwe as an Emerging Policy Laboratory: Early Learning, SEL, and GEDSI

Zimbabwe illustrates how foundational learning policy can be broadened beyond literacy and numeracy alone to include school readiness, safeguarding, gender equity, disability inclusion, and psychosocial well-being. The Zimbabwe Early Learning Policy (ZELP), launched in 2024, provides a policy framework for strengthening the infant school module and making early learning a compulsory and more coherent foundation for later schooling (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2024). Its implementation logic is reinforced by the Zimbabwe Early Learning Development Standards (ZELDS), which seek to clarify developmental expectations and support quality in early learning environments.

In 2025 and 2026, the policy architecture widened further through the Teacher Effectiveness and Equitable Access for All Children (TEACH) programme and the Ministry's Gender Equity, Disability and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) strategy, both of which point to a system-level understanding that teachers need support not only in instructional technique but also in creating safe, inclusive, and emotionally supportive classrooms (Education Development Trust, 2025; Moyo, 2026). This matters for learning poverty because children cannot reliably acquire foundational skills in settings marked by fear, exclusion, or poor school readiness. Zimbabwe's experience therefore provides a useful model of policy integration, even as structural implementation challenges remain substantial.

Implementation, Political Economy, and Institutional Capacity

Why Implementation Often Fails

The gap between policy design and classroom reality is one of the defining features of learning poverty reform. Many African systems have formally adopted competency-based curricula, continuous assessment regimes, inclusion policies, or foundational learning targets, yet these commitments do not automatically change daily instructional practice. Reforms fail when implementation is overloaded, under-financed, poorly sequenced, or politically weak (UNESCO, 2025a). Common constraints include delayed textbook procurement, insufficient teacher induction, weak district support, fragmented donor projects, limited data use, and administrative cultures that reward paperwork rather than improved teaching. These problems are particularly acute in decentralized systems where authority for staffing, supervision, procurement, and pedagogical support is distributed across multiple layers without strong coordination. Implementation science therefore matters; reforms need clear routines, manageable expectations, training tightly linked to actual materials, and feedback loops that help local actors solve problems rather than merely report compliance.

Zimbabwean evidence also highlights the implementation costs of weak accountability and poor stakeholder coordination. In their analysis of mission boarding schools, Mandikiana and Murairwa (2022) found that parents were generally satisfied with academic performance but criticized inadequate consultation, blurred stakeholder roles, infrastructure decay, overcrowding, and limited preparedness for blended learning. These findings matter for learning poverty because they show how school governance, communication, and responsiveness shape the conditions under which teaching and learning occur. Where parents are treated as peripheral rather than as key stakeholders, reforms risk losing legitimacy, feedback loops weaken, and schools become less able to adapt to crises or sustain quality improvements over time.

Teacher Management, Deployment, and Professional Politics

Teachers sit at the centre of learning poverty debates, yet policy conversations often oscillate unhelpfully between idealizing teachers as the solution and blaming them for poor outcomes. A more useful approach recognizes that teacher effectiveness is shaped by preparation, deployment, incentives, materials, working conditions, and support. Across Africa, inequitable deployment frequently leaves rural and marginalized schools with less qualified, less experienced, or more weakly supported teachers (UNICEF Innocenti, 2026b).

At the same time, teachers' unions and professional associations can either resist reform or help legitimize it. Sustainable change is more likely when reforms are framed as professional support; through coaching, better materials, manageable routines, and culturally grounded engagement with families and communities; rather than solely as surveillance or punitive accountability. Teacher policy must also equip educators to work effectively in multilingual, economically constrained, and religiously diverse settings where parental trust and community legitimacy influence whether children attend regularly and participate fully.

Comparative Evidence from Reform Initiatives

Comparative country experience shows that there is no single route out of learning poverty, but successful reforms share recurring features: an early-grade focus, operational simplicity, instructional support for teachers, clear attention to language, inclusion of socio-emotional and gender dimensions, and monitoring that reaches the school level (African Union, 2025a; UNESCO, 2025a). Kenya, Nigeria, and Zimbabwe illustrate different pathways through which these features are being assembled, with varying implications for scale and sustainability. Together, the cases suggest that both technical design and political settlement matter. Programs work better when they are translated into the daily routines of ministries, districts, schools, and communities, and when they are accompanied by a clear public narrative about why foundational learning should take precedence.

Kenya: Structured Pedagogy and Systemic Delivery

Kenya's reform trajectory is often associated with the Tusome early grade reading program, which remains a key reference point in the structured pedagogy literature. What made Tusome notable was not simply that it improved reading instruction, but that it did so through government systems at a national scale (Piper et al., 2018). The program's success has been attributed to clear learning benchmarks, the provision of high-quality instructional materials, strong teacher support mechanisms, and feedback structures that connected school-level realities to county and national decision-making.

Later reforms under Kenya's competency-based agenda have broadened the system's ambitions, but they have also revealed the risk of curricular and structural changes outpacing the foundational competencies on which later success depends. The Kenya case therefore demonstrates both the immense potential of well-designed implementation systems and the fragility of gains when foundational learning remains uneven across rural or marginalized spaces.

Nigeria: Professionalization, State-Level Reform, and Digital Governance

Nigeria presents a more heterogeneous picture because educational responsibility is spread across federal and state levels. Nevertheless, two themes stand out in recent reform discourse: the professionalization of teaching and the use of digital tools to support management and instruction. At the system level, current policy discussions emphasize the critical need to align pre-service preparation with ongoing professional development and classroom realities.

At the state level, EdoBEST has become a high-profile example of digitalized instructional delivery and monitoring. Although the evidence base remains mixed and some sources are descriptive rather than experimental, the program is important because it shows how tablets, scripted lessons, attendance tracking, and centralized data systems can alter the administrative conditions under which teaching occurs. Its broader significance lies in demonstrating that digital governance can increase implementation visibility, although

questions remain about teacher agency, contextual adaptation, infrastructure constraints, and long-term financial sustainability.

Zimbabwe: Foundational Learning, Inclusion, and System Resilience

Zimbabwe's education reform trajectory offers a particularly useful lens on how foundational learning policy, inclusion, safeguarding, and implementation intersect. The launch of the Zimbabwe Early Learning Policy (ZELP) in February 2024 signalled an explicit effort to strengthen the infant school module, make early learning compulsory from age four, and align early childhood provision with national and international commitments on school readiness and foundational learning (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2024; UNESCO, 2025d). ZELP is important because it reframes foundational learning as beginning before Grade 1 and because it links early literacy and numeracy to play-based development, school readiness, inclusion, and stronger family and community engagement. UNESCO's 2025 Zimbabwe spotlight further suggests that implementation of ZELP is uneven, especially where teacher language capacity, local-language materials, and school-level authority are insufficient to translate policy intent into practice (UNESCO, 2025d). These challenges also underscore the importance of the Zimbabwe Early Learning Development Standards (ZELDS), which provide a standards-based foundation for child development, pedagogy, and readiness but require sustained support if they are to shape classroom practice consistently.

Zimbabwe is also notable for the way foundational learning is being linked to safety, equity, and teacher development. The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education's Safeguarding and Gender Equity, Disability and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) Strategy, developed with support from the Education Development Trust (EDT), reflects an emerging recognition that learner protection, disability inclusion, and gender equity are not parallel agendas but enabling conditions for learning (Moyo, 2026). This orientation aligns with the TEACH programme, through which EDT has supported teacher professional development in literacy and numeracy and served as the principal implementing partner for Think Equal's social and emotional learning component in selected provinces (Education Development Trust, 2025). The Zimbabwe SEL pilot launched in 2025 targeted ECD-B classes in Manicaland and the Matabeleland provinces and sought to strengthen psychosocial support, empathy, self-esteem, and respect in early learning environments (Mashandure, 2025).

In parallel, Faith Nkala's (2026) policy analysis argues that Zimbabwe's strong formal commitments to gender equality will have limited effect unless gender-responsive pedagogy is embedded in teacher education, continuous professional development, mentoring, and community engagement. Mandikiana's (2020) analysis of zipped educational access during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic adds a further cautionary note: reforms that assume digital readiness or system resilience without addressing severe infrastructure gaps, teacher preparedness, and the harsh realities of rural poverty risk deepening rather than reducing inequity. More broadly, Mandikiana and Mutasa's (2026) analysis of structural marginalisation in Zimbabwe underscores that policy commitments to inclusion can remain largely rhetorical unless they are translated into accessible, rights-based implementation that systematically addresses disability, safeguarding, and institutional silos across sectors. Taken together, these Zimbabwean developments suggest that ending learning poverty requires a reform package that begins early, supports teachers continuously, protects learners, and recognises that pedagogical quality is inseparable from the social and institutional conditions in which children learn.

Financing, Governance, Inclusion, and the Future of Reform

Learning poverty is often discussed in pedagogical terms, but it is equally a question of public finance and state capacity. Systems cannot sustain early-grade reform if nearly all education expenditure is absorbed by administrative salaries while schools completely lack teaching and learning materials, coaching budgets, transport for supervision, or formative assessment tools. UNICEF's advocacy in Zimbabwe has argued for stronger public investment in education as a non-negotiable condition for improving quality and inclusion (UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2025b). At the continental level, the African Union's foundational literacy and numeracy agenda reinforces the need for governments to move beyond pilot-project dependence and embed foundational learning priorities in long-term sector plans, monitoring mechanisms, and budget allocations (African Union, 2024a, 2025b).

Financing matters not only in aggregate but in composition: spending that reaches the classroom in the form of books, teacher support, language-appropriate materials, school feeding, and disability accommodation is especially consequential in the early grades. Social protection also matters. In settings where economic hardship reduces attendance and concentration, cash transfers, fee waivers, meals, and transport support can improve the conditions under which learning reforms become meaningful for poor households.

Leadership and monitoring are similarly central. The 2025 UNESCO spotlight on foundational learning in Africa places school leaders and local education authorities at the centre of improvement, arguing that instructional leadership; not merely administrative management; is crucial to better early-grade learning (UNESCO, 2025a). This insight is significant because it broadens the analytical frame beyond teachers alone. District officials, inspectors, and school heads shape whether timetables protect literacy time, whether assessment results are discussed, whether coaching occurs, and whether inclusive practices are enacted.

Accountability in this sense should not be understood narrowly as top-down sanctions for poor performance; rather, it should be conceived as a support architecture in which data, supervision, and professional learning are aligned around the goal of improved foundational outcomes. Community accountability also matters, particularly in contexts where parents and local leaders heavily influence attendance, language choices, safety, and trust in schools.

Inclusion must be treated as a core dimension of foundational learning, not an adjunct concern. Children with disabilities, children in remote areas, girls facing early marriage or heavy domestic care burdens, and children affected by poverty, conflict, or climate stress are disproportionately represented among those who do not acquire basic skills (UNESCO, 2024a; UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2025a). UNICEF's Zimbabwe reporting documents the low participation of children with disabilities and the continuing burden of school costs on families, while the African Union's August 29, 2024 foundational literacy and numeracy conference explicitly linked ending learning poverty to inclusive education practices that ensure no child is left behind (African Union, 2024a; UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2025a).

The policy implication is clear: instructional reform must be paired with disability-inclusive materials, teacher preparation for differentiated instruction, child protection and safeguarding mechanisms, school feeding or cash support where needed, and gender-responsive and inclusive pedagogy that addresses everyday exclusion in classrooms. Inclusive education frameworks likewise stress that learning systems must adapt to learners rather than forcing learners to fit inflexible systems (UNESCO, 2024a; UNICEF, 2024). Zimbabwean scholarship on structural marginalisation further reinforces that inclusion fails when disability is acknowledged in text but not embedded in accountability, service delivery, and intersectoral coordination (Mandikiana & Mutasa, 2026).

Digital Tools and Generative Artificial Intelligence

Digital technology is increasingly invoked as part of the solution to learning poverty, but its educational value depends entirely on design and context. The history of educational technology in low-resource settings shows that hardware distribution alone rarely improves learning. By contrast, digital systems that support lesson delivery, track attendance, or provide teachers with timely feedback may improve implementation fidelity when they are embedded in clear pedagogical models. UNESCO's work published in 2025 on multilingual education and foundational learning in Africa points toward the future relevance of technology for local language content creation, teacher support, and assessment (UNESCO, 2025b, 2025c).

Emerging debates around generative artificial intelligence are especially important. Used carefully, such tools could help teachers generate decodable texts in African languages, create differentiated practice materials, automate some formative checks, or assist school systems in analysing data. However, these possibilities are highly contingent on safeguards around bias, language coverage, data protection, cost, and the absolute preservation of teacher judgment. For African education systems, the most defensible principle is therefore augmentation rather than replacement: AI should strengthen the professional work of teachers and school leaders, not bypass them.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Six policy priorities emerge from this synthesis:

1. **Elevate Foundational Learning:** Governments should elevate foundational learning in the early grades to the centre of sector planning, ensuring that curricula, assessments, teacher education, and supervision are tightly aligned around minimum proficiency in literacy and numeracy (UNESCO et al., 2024; UNESCO IICBA, 2024).
2. **Implement Structured Pedagogy:** Instruction should be made more effective and equitable through structured pedagogy, targeted teaching, adaptive or differentiated instruction, regular coaching, and routine formative assessment, adapted to the realities of overcrowded and under-resourced classrooms (Piper et al., 2018; Pratham, 2026; UNICEF Innocenti, 2026a).
3. **Align Language Policies:** Language policy must be treated as a core instrument of learning reform, with mother tongue-based multilingual education supported by appropriate materials, teacher preparation, and gradual transition models (UNESCO, 2025b; World Bank, 2021).
4. **Integrate SEL and Safeguarding:** Governments and partners should integrate social and emotional learning and safeguarding into foundational learning strategies, recognizing that self-regulation, belonging, mental well-being, and safe relationships directly influence attendance, engagement, and persistence (UNESCO, 2024b, 2025a).
5. **Adopt Inclusive Pedagogy:** Reforms should adopt gender-responsive and inclusive pedagogy, disability inclusion, and context-sensitive community engagement so that schools address the structural barriers created by poverty, unequal gender norms, harmful practices, linguistic marginalization, and local socio-cultural and religious dynamics (UNESCO, 2024a; UNICEF, 2020, 2021b).
6. **Strengthen Implementation Systems:** Implementation systems need strengthening through instructional leadership, fairer teacher deployment, financing that directly reaches schools, and data systems that support local problem solving rather than administrative compliance alone (UNESCO, 2025a; UNICEF Innocenti, 2026b).

These priorities should be pursued within comprehensive, nationally owned reform strategies rather than as isolated projects.

Toward an Integrated Strategy for Ending Learning Poverty

An integrated strategy for ending learning poverty in Africa must combine pedagogical reform with social policy, public finance, and institution building. Too often, debates are polarized between those who emphasize classroom methods and those who stress structural inequality. In practice, both matter. A child who is taught with effective methods but attends sporadically because of hunger, household labour, insecurity, or gendered expectations is unlikely to sustain learning gains. Equally, a child who attends regularly but receives instruction in an unfamiliar language, at an inappropriate level, and in a classroom that is emotionally unsafe is also unlikely to acquire foundational skills. The policy challenge is therefore to design systems in which instructional quality, learner well-being, inclusion, and household support work together rather than in isolation (UNESCO, 2025a; UNICEF, 2021).

At the level of pedagogy, the evidence reviewed here suggests that no single method is sufficient. Structured pedagogy can improve consistency and minimum quality, but it needs to be complemented by differentiation so that teaching meets learners where they are. TaRL can accelerate recovery for learners who have fallen behind, but it must be embedded in ordinary school routines if it is to avoid becoming a short-term campaign. Mother tongue-based multilingual education can improve comprehension and participation, but it depends on materials, teacher language proficiency, and careful transition planning.

SEL can improve readiness to learn, but it cannot compensate for absent textbooks or chronically untrained teachers. GRIP can reduce everyday exclusion and improve participation, but it must be institutionalized in teacher standards, supervision, and school policy rather than left to isolated sensitization workshops. The implication is that effective reform is additive and complementary: strategies become exponentially more powerful when they are designed to reinforce one another.

Political and social legitimacy also matter. Reform is more sustainable when communities see schools as relevant, respectful, and responsive to local realities. In some contexts, this means working with religious leaders to support girls' attendance and school safety; in others, it means engaging local language communities in the development of reading materials; elsewhere, it may require social protection mechanisms that reduce the economic pressure on children to work. The broader lesson is that learning poverty is not solved only by technical packages imported into schools. It is reduced when governments cultivate trust, coordinate across sectors, and build an educational settlement in which families believe that schooling is meaningful and attainable for their children. Such legitimacy is especially important in fragile, drought-affected, or conflict-affected contexts where continuity of learning depends as much on community relationships as on formal policy.

Measurement should also evolve. While the learning poverty indicator has been valuable for advocacy because of its clarity, reducing the crisis requires richer monitoring of what happens before and around age 10. Systems need routine data on school readiness, attendance, language of instruction, teacher allocation, classroom process quality, inclusion of children with disabilities, school safety, and gendered participation patterns.

They also need implementation metrics that track whether books arrive, whether coaching happens, whether teachers use assessment information, and whether communities are engaged. For researchers, the agenda is equally clear: more longitudinal and mixed-method work is needed to understand how foundational learning reforms interact with poverty, conflict, climate shocks, and local norms over time. Without such empirical evidence, countries risk over-investing in visible reforms while underestimating the institutional and social conditions required for durable change.

CONCLUSION

Addressing learning poverty in Africa requires more than a menu of promising interventions; it requires systems capable of turning evidence into sustained classroom practice. The policy debate has matured beyond the question of whether foundational learning matters. The central challenge now is how to organize education systems so that every child, especially the most marginalized, encounters effective teaching early enough for later learning to be possible. The evidence reviewed in this manuscript suggests that progress is most likely when pedagogy, language policy, financing, social and emotional learning, gender-responsive and inclusive pedagogy, teacher management, and monitoring are treated as interdependent rather than separate domains (UNESCO, 2024b, 2025a; UNICEF, 2020, 2021).

Structured pedagogy, targeted instruction, differentiated teaching, and multilingual approaches offer practical levers for improvement, but their impact depends on professional support, political commitment, social legitimacy, and institutionalization within ordinary government routines. For Africa, reducing learning poverty is therefore not a narrow technical reform. It is a broader state-building and social justice project in which equitable public systems must be made capable of delivering the foundational skills on which economic transformation, democratic participation, and human flourishing depend.

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