



Delivering reading intervention to the poorest children: The case of Liberia and EGRA-Plus, a primary grade reading assessment and intervention[☆]

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ABSTRACT

As governments, donors and implementation organisations re-focus Education for All Goals in terms of quality of education, increasing concerns have been raised over low literacy levels in developing countries. This paper provides key learning from the application of an early reading intervention applied in post-conflict Liberia, which included a robust assessment tool (Early Grade Reading Assessment) to measure the impact of the programme on students' reading levels. A rationale for the design and methodology applied by the two implementing organisations (Research Triangle Institute (RTI) and Concern Worldwide) is provided, situated within the Liberian education context. The paper demonstrates the positive impact on programme quality, contextual relevancy and scale-up that a diagnostic baseline assessment has when linked to a tailored literacy intervention. Lessons learnt are presented to guide the identification of best practice in early literacy interventions at national-level and internationally.

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1. Introduction

Global discourse has shifted from access to education for all towards focusing on the quality of education available to students. Data from international assessments such as the SACMEQ, PIRLS and TIMSS provide comparable data across developing countries that demonstrate serious gaps in skills and knowledge that students are expected to achieve in formal school. As demonstrated by [Hanushek and Woessman \(2007\)](#) it is educational quality (and not the number of years of schooling) that has powerful effects on individual earnings and economic growth. Considerable progress has been made in increasing access to education through the Education for All initiative, but now these gains must be capitalised by ensuring that quality education is available for children to learn effectively in school.

[Brown \(2010\)](#) articulated the “twin crisis” in *access to school* and *learning in school*, linking high drop-out rates for children in early grades (approximately 10 million children in sub-Saharan Africa each year) to poor quality education. “One of the reasons that so many children drop out of school after the early grades is that they have not mastered the basic literacy and numeracy skills that they need to progress to higher levels. . . many parents keep their children out of school because they know that education systems are failing their children”. Addressing this quality gap is essential for individuals and societies to access their right to education and to benefit from the many social, health and economic gains associated with education. While returns on educational investments are not immediate and often come to fruit for subsequent

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generations, it is essential to break the inter-generational cycle of poverty. Education is strongly related to individual market productivity, improved cognitive health in children of education parents, improved contraceptive efficiency, improved individual health, child health and spouse health, reduced criminal activity and improved social cohesion (Wolfe and Zuvekas, 1995). The *Global Partnership for Education* (2011) finds that 1.1 million people could be lifted out of poverty if all students in low-income countries left school with basic reading skills – equivalent to a 12% cut in global poverty. While this list of benefits is certainly not extensive, the arguments for investing in literacy skills are compelling – literacy is a key to unlocking an individual's potential with immeasurable social and individual benefits. Within this global context it is imperative that quality measures and interventions are directly linked to improvements in literacy achievement in primary education reform. In the development of the Early Grade Reading intervention (EGRA Plus), a focus on quality was guided by evidence-based research on beginning reading instruction and programme elements that have the strongest effects on student learning. We also were very interested in ensuring that the programme was portable and could be implemented in a variety of contexts. The design of the intervention study was experimental with three groups of 60 schools each: a group that included informal assessment and the reading intervention component, a group that received informal assessment results on student reading achievement only, and a control group. The experimental nature of the EGRA Plus intervention provided strong evidence of the efficacy of the intervention in improving reading achievement of students in grades 1–3. The concept of an “intervention” in this case is to introduce elements of reading instruction currently not practiced in the Liberian school system and monitor the outcomes of the new/improved practices to influence changes in current practice and to embed the changes in the national education system in the long-term.

As educationalists, policy-makers and donors are increasingly focused on evidence-based interventions that focus on quality measures, the EGRA:Plus intervention is described in this paper as an example of a successful approach. The EGRA:Plus reading intervention provides lessons, pedagogy, and continuous assessment measures for beginning reading skills that:

1. provide formative/continuous assessment data on student learning progress towards a clearly defined reading goal;
2. Provide diagnostic data on gaps in skills and competencies for early reading, and strategies to close the gaps;
3. provide formal and informal assessment data that allow for the evaluation of the effectiveness of the intervention to inform policy and curricula development and national scale-up. In this context, following the two-year pilot in which results indicated that students in grades 2 and 3 who attended classes in the full intervention group, on average, made nearly 3 years academic growth in one year, the EGRA Plus intervention planned to scale up as a component of a larger project, the Liberia Teacher Training Programme funded by United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and a new intervention began with some variations in a project conducted by Concern Worldwide.

This paper provides an overview of the EGRA:Plus intervention as implemented by two organisations, The Liberia Teacher Training Programme (at national-level) and Concern Worldwide (at district-level). Maintaining a focus on the intervention, rather than the assessment itself, this paper documents the experience of applying quality measures to improve early reading skills in a weak educational setting, raising the standard of teaching and learning

to meet specific literacy goals. There are profound implications for improving the reading outcomes in the early grades on a national scale. Most importantly, improving literacy rates can have a direct impact on reducing poverty levels. *Hansushek and Woessman* (2007) state clearly in their examination of the impact of quality education on economic outcomes:

The simple answers in the discussion of economic implications of education are that educational quality, measured by cognitive skills, has a strong impact on individual earnings. More than that, however, educational quality has a strong and robust influence on economic growth. (p. 2)

They point to the importance of focusing on quality indicators in education such as how well children are learning in school rather than quantitative indicators such as increasing access to education. Improving the economic outlook in Liberia is tied to improving student learning, requiring quality programmes that can meet the needs of students in diverse educational settings. The EGRA Plus programme has demonstrated efficacy and by replicating the intervention in different local contexts, and by scaling up the intervention, it is anticipated that improved student learning outcomes will contribute to reducing poverty levels in Liberia. Student learning outcomes can contribute to reducing poverty levels in Liberia as long as improvement can be sustained and increased over the next several decades. Significant improvement in student literacy skills alone is not, of course, sufficient to modify the national poverty level. However, unless the population increases literacy levels, it is unlikely that a stable and strong economy can be achieved (*Anderson, 1966*).

2. Liberian context

Liberia is a country that is recovering from a brutal 14 year civil war that devastated the country's infrastructure and killed hundreds of thousands of citizens. Currently, a strong UN presence ensures that the efforts to rebuild the country, headed by President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, proceed peacefully. There is excitement about the future and many citizens believe that Liberia is on its way to a full and peaceful recovery from the war. Essential to this recovery is the rebuilding of the educational system in Liberia. Education institutions were targeted during the war – 31% of public schools and 24% of community schools were destroyed, and many teachers were killed or fled to other countries (*Ministry of Education, 2010a*). Many citizens simply lost an opportunity to obtain even a rudimentary education during the conflict. The result is that many teachers in Liberia have very little formal education and struggle with basic skills themselves. Approximately 60% of primary school teachers do not have any certification or teacher training (*Ministry of Education, 2010a*).

2.1. Public education in Liberia

Not only is there a dearth of educated teachers available to teach young children the infrastructure necessary to support their upgrading and to provide adequate facilities in which to teach, remain woefully substandard, with only 37% of schools assessed as “intact, repaired or new”, and 13% “almost unusable or with major damage” (*Ministry of Education, 2010b*). Teachers work with a minimal of resources – approximately 30% of schools reported owning no textbooks in the core subjects in 2008/2009 (*Ministry of Education, 2010b*). Rural schools have the highest pupil-textbook ratios, reaching as high as thirty textbooks to each student in rural River Gee County (*Ministry of Education, 2010b*). Unqualified teachers account for over half of the primary school teaching staff, many of whom are not on the Government Payroll. It is challenging to ascertain the number of unpaid or “volunteer” teachers at

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