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Successes and challenges of implementing a teacher education project in rural Sierra Leone

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the successes and challenges of implementing a teacher education project that was designed to improve methods of teaching reading and writing in rural Sierra Leone. Thirty school leaders representing five chiefdoms participated in three five-day workshops, which were held over the course of the 2013–2014 academic year. After completing each of the weeklong workshops, the school leaders were expected to provide similar workshops for teachers in their regions. The hope was that in this way the project's impact would be increased. Research questions pertained to the school leaders' perceptions about their learning of the workshop's literacy methods and eliciting their thoughts about the successes and challenges of project implementation in their regions. Multiple data sources were used, including informal interviews, pre–post surveys, document analyses and classroom observations. Our findings indicated that the school leaders improved significantly in their self-reported knowledge and use of literacy methods. They reported they successfully implemented local workshops, and their participants were receptive and eager to learn and use the teaching methods in their schools. The school leaders reported significant challenges, however, in implementing local workshops because of insufficient classroom resources, difficult travel conditions to the school sites and a lack of formal education of many of the teachers. Findings are discussed within the context of this developing country as it continues to rebuild its school system from the civil war, overcome severe economic hardships and manage a deadly virus that is currently interfering with everyday life, including classroom teaching and learning.

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This paper examines the implementation of a teacher education project, the Diagnostic Teaching Model (DTM) (International Reading Association, 2006), in rural Sierra Leone. The successes and challenges of the project are shared so that others can build on the experiences learned. The study was informed by current research about the importance of education in developing countries (Berger & Fisher, 2013; Eldred, 2008; Jogwu, 2010) and the prominence of teachers' knowledge and methodology in children's learning to read and write (Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gailin, & Vasquez Heilig, 2005; Konstantopoulos & Chung, 2011; Nye, Konstantopoulos, & Hedges, 2004). Sierra Leone's social, cultural and economic features contextualize the findings reported in this study.

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1. Review of related literature

There exists a consistently strong relationship among a country's educational investments, the development of its human capital and subsequent economic growth (Berger & Fisher, 2013; Blundell, Cohen, & Soto, 2007; Goldin & Katz, 2008; Hanushek & Woessmann, 2012). Unfortunately, the effects of educational investment are typically long-term and not immediately recognizable in terms of economic productivity and social progress. Consequently, even the best political leaders are hesitant to expend limited financial resources on education because the expenditures will not be realized for a generation to come. The challenges that must be addressed in education reform are numerous and complex, yet literacy education is fundamental to economic and social progress (Jogwu, 2010; Levin & Lockheed, 2012; Sailors et al., 2014). The components of today's literacy education requires meeting global standards, providing sufficient school resources and developing a skilled teaching force that knows how to effectively teach children to read, write and think critically (Sailors et al., 2014).

Many African countries lack universal K-12 education, and Sierra Leone is no exception (Free the Children, 2014). Sierra Leone ranks 182nd out of 186 countries in the Human Development Index, and 66% of its population lives in poverty (Global Partnership for Education, 2014). The country's literacy rate remains one of the lowest in the world with only 37% adults and 52% of the children able to read and write fluently (The World Bank, 2014).

Sierra Leone's schools are seriously underfunded. Student to teacher ratio averages 66:1 (Hinton, 2009). Texts and other learning materials are largely unavailable; chalk, paper, and pencils are often difficult to find in the rural schools. Many teachers are uncertified and only 40% of the country's primary grade teachers have completed a primary education themselves (UNESCO, 2012). Uncertified teachers do not receive salaries from the government; rather, they work for whatever compensation the parents of the children they teach can provide. These *volunteer teachers* hope to eventually be employed in salaried teaching positions, but few can afford the additional schooling required for teacher certification.

There have been significant gains in the country's efforts to achieve universal primary education. In 2000, the government introduced a policy of free primary education, which meant that the government began paying tuition fees and providing teaching and learning materials for local schools (Nishimuko, 2009). Between 2001 and 2005, school attendance and retention doubled throughout the country (Hinton, 2009; UNESCO, 2014). In spite of these achievements, the educational system suffers from underfunding with shortages of trained teachers, insufficient classroom materials and large teacher-to-student classroom ratios (UNESCO, 2014). Some schools still charge for classroom supplies and uniforms, which is a practice that prevents many children from attending. Secondary education remains fee-based (approximately \$50 a year) with only about 25% of Sierra Leone's children attending school beyond the elementary grades (UNICEF, 2012).

As with many developing countries, the culturally established practice of educating boys rather than girls persists in Sierra Leone (UNESCO, 2014). About one-third of girls in Sierra Leone do not attend school at all, and those who attend typically only acquire a primary grade education (Free the Children, 2014). Secondary education for girls is not encouraged because most families expect them to marry in early adolescence and have children. There is a high rate of pregnancy throughout the country with one-third of all pregnancies involving teenage girls (Government of Sierra Leone, 2013). As a result of such cultural practices, as well as the tuition fees involved, girls rarely participate in any formal education after the elementary grades.

1.1. Importance of teacher knowledge in children's literacy learning

Educational research consistently indicates that teacher knowledge is the most important factor in children's learning (Darling-Hammond, 2000, 2006; Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Heck, 2009; Konstantopoulos & Chung, 2011; Nye et al., 2004). The impact of teacher knowledge is no different in developing countries than in advanced ones because what teachers know and the methods they use have great influence on children's learning to reading and write. Teacher knowledge is long associated with effective schools in developing countries (Levin & Lockheed, 2012).

Educational research has shown that well-planned and sustained professional development opportunities can improve teachers' pedagogical knowledge (Birman, Desimone, Porter, & Garet, 2000; Borko, 2004; Gerard, Varma, Corliss, & Linn, 2011; Sailors & Rice, 2010). The research further shows that teachers' professional development opportunities should be sustained over time, study topics must be pertinent to their daily instructional needs, and teachers need ample opportunities to interact with colleagues in learning how to apply new methods in their teaching (Borko, 2004; Langer, 2001; Nieto, 2009)

1.2. Diagnostic teaching model

Literacy is a social and cultural process in which participants actively construct meaning with texts (Heath, 1983; Street, 1993). Yet there is no single way of constructing meaning, and, as teacher educators, we are well aware that there is an inherent danger in applying research findings from one cultural context to another. This teacher education project, however, did not presume a universal remedy to literacy education. Instead, it was based on our belief, as well as the aforementioned empirical findings, that teachers make the most significant difference in children's learning. The methods shared in this teacher education project were derived from international research findings (e.g., Freire, 1970; Vygotsky, 1986) about how students learn to read and write, and that specific principles of classroom practice would improve teachers' efficacy and children's learning (Smagorinsky, 2009). We anticipated that the project's participants would actively reshape the methods to fit their community contexts and needs (Bartolome, 1994; Luke, 1998), and we encouraged such applications.

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