Problematizing early grade reading: Should the post-2015 agenda treasure what is measured?

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Learning has emerged as a central theme within post-2015 debates. Central to these efforts have been a focus on literacy, and specifically early grade reading. This article identifies significant challenges raised by the current framing of emergent literacy in international educational development circles. Specifically, we examine how the Early Grade Reading Assessment, or EGRA, one very influential oral reading assessment tool based largely on an American reading assessment called DIBELs, has shaped the educational quality debate in the past decade and what important elements might be missing from this dominant view of reading. To do so, the article first considers the historical development of EGRA. We discuss concerns with the model of reading embedded in EGRA. We then examine the evidence, to date, of the impact of EGRA-informed interventions in places like Liberia, Malawi, and Kenya. The article concludes with implications for the future of literacy and international educational development, especially in light of discussions within the Learning Metrics Task Force to make early grade reading a central indicator of educational quality in the post-2015 agenda.

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1. Introduction: learning goals and literacy

Learning has emerged as a central theme within post-2015 debates. A variety of organizations, including UNESCO, UNICEF, the Hewlett Foundation, the Commonwealth Ministers, the Education for All Global Monitoring Report team, and the Brookings Institution have encouraged the adoption of various learning goals in the post-2015 agenda (Barrett, 2011).

Central to these efforts has been a focus on literacy, and specifically early grade reading. For example, the Hewlett Foundation and the UK's Department for International Development have for several years funded a large-scale household survey of children's reading and mathematics performance in India (ASER) that has since spread to Pakistan, Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, Mali, and Senegal (e.g., Uwezo, 2010). As a second example, UNESCO's Institute for Statistics and the Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution convened a Learning Metrics Task Force that engaged stakeholders globally and devised a Global Learning Domains Framework that emphasizes literacy as one of the seven core areas of learning.

Such initiatives indicate efforts to move from considerations of inputs and access to considerations of outcomes and quality.

However, without sufficient attention to the processes in classrooms that produce quality (see Schweisfurth, this volume) and the influences at home that undergird and support it, such attempts present several dangers for devising effective interventions and enabling systemic change for learning. While this trend may bring useful attention to learning, there are very serious concerns about how learning is being boiled down to literacy and how literacy is being conceptualized in compartmentalized, staged reading skills supported only in classrooms with implications for investment, measurement and prioritization.

This article identifies significant challenges raised by the current framing of emergent literacy in international educational development circles. Specifically, we examine how the Early Grade Reading Assessment, or EGRA, one very influential oral reading assessment tool based largely on an American reading assessment called DIBELs, has shaped the educational quality debate in the past decade and what important elements might be missing from this dominant view of reading. To do so, the article first briefly considers the historical development of EGRA. We discuss concerns with the model of reading embedded in EGRA. We then consider the evidence, to date, of the impact of EGRA-informed interventions in places like Liberia, Malawi, and Kenya. The article concludes with implications for the future of literacy and international educational development, especially in light of discussions within the Learning Metrics Task Force to make early grade reading a central indicator of educational quality in the post-2015 agenda.

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2. Background: EGRA's evolution

In 2000, the U.S. National Reading Panel issued an influential report, *Teaching Children to Read*. The National Reading Panel privileged cognitive and psychological studies with experimental designs (Coles, 2000); further, the National Reading Panel based its recommendations on research published in English and conducted primarily on learning to read in English, including few studies of second language literacy. Finally, the National Reading Panel Summary reduced the massive meta-review, at times contradicting the evidence available in its longer report (Allington, 2002; Garan, 2002) to five "pillars" of reading:

1. phonemic awareness, or the ability to identify the individual sounds in spoken words;
2. phonics, or the correspondence of letters (graphemes) to sounds (phonemes);
3. fluency, which is the ability to read text accurately and quickly, with natural prosody;
4. vocabulary; and
5. comprehension, which is the ability to understand and communicate meaning from what is read.

The report simplified very complex debates about these key terms, especially phonics (Garan, 2002), fluency (Krashen, 2002), and the relationship between phonics and comprehension (Coles, 2000). While the importance of phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension for learning to read alphabetic writing is indisputable, scholars have critiqued the way that scientific evidence has been "reviewed, distorted, and misrepresented" in the NRP report and subsequent policies that have drawn upon it (Allington, 2002, p. 4). The "five core components" of literacy, for example, do not include some essential features of reading, such as concepts about print and lexical knowledge (Allington, 2002; Cunningham, 2002). Further, while some reading scholars favor a stage-wise approach, insisting on starting with the "parts" like letters and phonemes, most concur that oral vocabulary must be built from the earliest ages for reading success, that writing is essential to literacy learning, and that literacy is best promoted through "balanced" approaches that incorporate explicit skills instruction with authentic texts and a focus on comprehension (Samuels and Farstrup, 2011).

The version of reading represented in the National Reading Panel report served as the foundation for the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) assessment (upon which EGRA is based), a continuous assessment classroom tool developed for use in the US that reduces reading to discrete skills and then condenses those skills to isolated, quantitative measures. DIBELS consists of a set of short, timed tests meant to measure phonemic awareness, alphabetic principle, fluency, reading comprehension, and vocabulary. DIBELS has been roundly criticized by highly respected literacy researchers for making claims not based in evidence; distorting the skills required to read and then testing only a fragment of those skills; emphasizing speed over accuracy; proving difficult to administer consistently; and benefiting financially from the inappropriate promotion of tests as part of the federal Reading First program (see, e.g., Goodman 2006; Riedel, 2007; Samuels, 2007).

When access to schooling expanded rapidly throughout the world in the 1990s, it placed significant strain on educational systems, causing teacher and facility shortages and high student-teacher ratios, particularly in the early grades; these shifts had significant implications for the quality of education on offer. Gradually, major development actors began to focus on reading as the fulcrum to address quality. In the 2000s, influential actors within the World Bank began tinkering with tests of reading in places like Mali, Peru, and Brazil, and they found very low levels of learning (Bender, 2005; Abadzi et al., 2005; World Bank, 2002). In 2006, Colette Chabbott completed a desk review of early grades reading for USAID. The review drew heavily upon the National Research Council's *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* and the National Reading Panel's *Teaching Children to Read*, adopting their model of reading. The resulting recommendations endorsed tasks developed for English monolinguals and relied on indicators like "words correct per minute," but they also emphasized the importance of pre-reading skills, reading materials, one-to-one contact with more expert reader mentors (such as teachers or paraprofessionals), and the importance of mother-tongue literacy and oral development in the target language. In other words, this version of "early grade reading" was broader than what eventually emerged.

Also in 2006, USAID, through its Education Data for Decision Making (EdData II) project, contracted with Research Triangle Institute (RTI) International staff to develop an instrument for assessing early grade reading. RTI, with the input of an expert panel, took the DIBELS subtests, modified them slightly to different languages, and field tested them, resulting in a suite of short, adaptable, timed tests that have come to be known as Early Grade Reading Assessment, or EGRA (Gove and Cvelich, 2010; RTI, 2009). EGRA includes tests such as rapid letter naming, the pronunciation of letter sounds, nonsense word reading, familiar word reading, and comprehension questions based on a short passage; different tasks can be adapted or excluded in different locations. The assessment focuses on what it calls the "three early stages of reading acquisition," noting that "the rate at which children pass through these phases varies by country and language," but that, nonetheless, the tests provide "rough guidance for when most children should acquire these skills" (p. 12). Those "stages" and relevant test components are:

Stage	Test components
0, Emergent	Phonemic awareness
	Listening comprehension
1, Decoding	Letter name
	Letter sound
	Nonsense word
	Familiar word
2, Confirmation and fluency	Paragraph reading (oral reading fluency) with comprehension
	Dictation

These components are available but may not be employed. For example, the listening comprehension task is often not included. Further, it is important to note that the idea that reading is acquired in "stages" is not universally embraced; many reading experts insist that comprehension and fluency must be taught simultaneously with decoding skills.

In practice, while most of the EGRA reports on tests implemented include measures across all three stages, the greatest variation in skills shows up in emergent ("Stage 0") and decoding ("Stage 1) skills, while confirmation and fluency ("Stage 3") scores are regularly limited or non-existent. Because these assessments have come to drive USAID investment in education, the framing of stages and these assessments have promoted interventions that stress phonics and phonemic awareness more than comprehension.

Based on enthusiasm shared by actors at the World Bank, USAID, and RTI, EGRA expanded rapidly in the new millennium. By 2011, it had been adapted and applied in 50 countries and 70 languages (for updated figures, see the EGRA tracker at www.eddataglobal.org).