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Boosting Communities of Practice to Strengthen Teaching Practices and Book Use

Introduction

Textbooks and supplementary reading materials can help strengthen literacy skills, but teachers remain the most important input for learning. In many countries, they do not have the knowledge and skills to use learning resources properly, or the motivation to apply what they learn. In Sierra Leone, a 2014 assessment showed that 87 percent of second graders could not read a single word of a short passage while another study showed that book availability did not always lead to use, and that teacher workshops did not necessarily produce substantial changes in teaching practices.

Communities of practice (CoPs)—networks for teachers to provide mutual support and learning—can provide teachers with support to utilize learning materials effectively, while performance-based incentives can provide motivation. The Results in Education or All Children (REACH) Trust Fund supported a World Bank team to explore the use of results-based financial incentives in Sierra Leone to improve teachers' participation in communities of practice and to strengthen teaching practices, book utilization, and ultimately learning outcomes, in lower grades.

Intervention

The two-part intervention, taking place in Bo district, divided 120 schools into four groups of 30 schools each. For the first intervention, teachers for Grades 1–3 and the head teacher from all 120 schools participated in two workshops, including training on how to use books for teaching. The workshops incorporated several enhancements over previous workshops: a focus on select content areas and skills, highly trained facilitators, small class sizes, practical interaction, and daily homework.

The first group of schools only participated in the workshops. Teachers in the other groups were also invited to join communities of practice with assigned coaches. Besides meeting regularly within schools, the groups met monthly in “clusters” of local schools to receive coaching. The second and third groups had one coach per 10 schools; schools



The Results in Education for All Children (REACH) Trust Fund under the World Bank Group seeks to help countries strengthen their education services by focusing initiatives on results. The IMPACT series describes how results-based projects funded by REACH influence learning, education systems, and policy making.

in the third group were eligible to receive a bonus for CoP teacher participation and reading-tools use in school. Schools in the fourth group had one coach per three schools and more frequent meetings.

Schools received 10,000 Leone (approximately US\$1) for each teacher who attended a cluster CoP meeting and extra for holding weekly CoP meetings. Coaches observed and measured schools for improved classroom practices and outcomes, such as whether children used reading books in class.

Baseline and endline surveys measured intervention impacts, and included lesson observations, a teacher questionnaire, and a student learning assessment. Impacts measured included teacher knowledge and practices, and student learning assessment scores in vocabulary and comprehension. The short period between baseline and endline likely reduced the observed impacts on teaching practices and especially learning outcomes.

In total, 349 teachers received training, and all four groups were more likely to use learning materials from the workshops. Teachers improved their content knowledge and teaching practices, although these gains translated only weakly to student learning; only Grade 2 registered statistically significant improvement in student performance.

Impact

The findings from the project are informing the scale-up of communities of practice nationwide. The World Bank's Free Education Project and a separate UNICEF program are considering the approaches developed through the CoP project to guide future teacher training in Sierra Leone, such as adoption of more frequent, school-level training. The Free Education Project will cover all primary and secondary schools—some 10,000 schools, 75,000 teachers, and 2 million students. Training incorporating the use of tablets will initially target grade 1–3 teachers but is expected to expand across the whole system by 2025. The UNICEF program targets preprimary and primary teachers in select districts nationwide.

Both programs are referencing reading materials developed under the REACH project: one anthology that teachers can teach from and a second that students read on their own. Other countries such as Cameroon have expressed interest in these materials.

The project has helped change policy makers' thinking about what constitutes good training and a good coach. Schools under the Free Education Program won't be eligible for financial incentives, but the program is experimenting with career-linked incentives for teachers, such as the opportunity to be promoted to a head teacher or a coach for other teachers.

Cover photo: courtesy of GPE/Kelley Lynch

Study Structure

120 SCHOOLS / GRADES 1–3

Group	Communities of practice (CoP) intervention
Workshop only	None
Nonincentives	Less intensive CoP: One coach per 10 schools, monthly CoP meetings, network meetings with neighboring schools every two months
Incentives	Less intensive CoP + incentives
Intensive	More intensive CoP: One coach per three schools, monthly CoP meetings, monthly network meetings

RESULTS IN EDUCATION FOR ALL CHILDREN (REACH) RESOURCES

For more information on the REACH Cameroon intervention please refer to the RBF Education EVIDENCE note, "Can School Grants and Teacher Incentives be Used to Increase School Access and Improve Quality?" on the REACH web page.

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