

Public Disclosure Authorized

Improving Reading and Mathematics in the Early Grades in West Bank and Gaza (TA-P155199) Completion Summary Report

The following report provides a summary of this TA activity conducted in Palestine during FY16. Essentially, it summarizes the contributions of a series of workshops¹, which involved the participation of staff from different departments of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MOEHE), including the Curriculum Center (CC), Assessment and Evaluation Department (AED), National Institute for Educational Training (NIET), Directorate of Planning (DP), Department of Supervision and Quality (DSQ). NIET and DSQ participated both with staff located in their Ramallah headquarters and with staff based in different districts. Overall, the average number of participants for each workshop was around 20; and the total number of participants who attended at least one of the workshop sessions is up to 40. The selection of participants was jointly agreed with the MOEHE and it implied a balanced mix of staff involved in the curriculum reform process representing the units and departments mentioned above.

Moreover, this completion summary report attempts to address the extent to which the PDO objective and intermediate objectives of the activity have been met. In doing so, this summary report will rely upon the anonymous feedback provided by workshop participants and on in-depth individual interviews of selected counterparts carried out at the wrap-up of the last workshop in June 2016. Outcomes of the discussions held during the workshops and documents produced and shared will be taken into account as well.

Development Objective of the Activity

The TA Development Objective *is to inform the ongoing curriculum and teacher professional development reforms in primary education and to strengthen capacity within two key related Ministry departments (the Curriculum Center and the Assessment and Evaluation Department). This will be done by engaging with the Palestinian policy makers, evaluation experts, curriculum developers, and selected practitioners in a series of workshops to analyze and integrate policy and implementation lessons from the Early Grade studies already carried out.*

Ongoing curriculum Reform in Palestine

Since 2014, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education has been engaged in the reform of the primary school curriculum, starting on the areas of Math, Science and Arabic. The Math curriculum for the first two grades was finalized in early 2016, while the Reading curriculum is now expected to be completed before the summer 2016. The first workshop of this TA, in

¹ Three Workshops were arranged, in December 2015, February-March 16 and May-June 16, respectively. The first one focused on Reading and on EGRA-TIMSS statistical analysis. The second focused on Math and also included training on data analysis. The third one focused on Reading and served as the wrap-up session for the TA activity. All the details regarding agenda, presentations, participants and conclusions of each workshop, have been compiled, shared with the client, and are accessible in the Portal (see Annexes 1 and 2 for an outline).

December 2015, helped the participants reach a consensus on the need for a common core standards document that included standards, domains and learning outcomes as part of the curriculum reform of both Reading and Math. That workshop also created a favorable professional and institutional environment, which laid the foundation for productive collaboration and technical discussions between different departments directly or indirectly involved in the curriculum reform process. Such collaboration, which had simply been lacking before, resulted in meaningful and effective feedback from field practitioners (supervisors from Governorates as well as staff from the National Institute for Educational Training) to curriculum experts regarding the design and development of the new curriculum. The March and May workshops/sessions built on these encouraging foundations in order to advance in more specific and specialized topics related to teaching and learning Reading and Math in the Early Grades.

The March workshop focused on Math and, with the Math curriculum already updated, served mainly as an experimental exercise for lesson planning, item drafting, and understanding the alignment between curriculum, instruction and assessment in the context of the new standards. Moreover, the May workshop helped develop new ideas on how to teach the Arabic language, especially regarding phonemic awareness and graphemes, i.e., how to put letters and sounds together in order to build a word. In that respect, the curriculum reform committee for Reading had been meeting very frequently in the three months prior to this workshop to discuss potential avenues for the reform. In such a critical and busy period, key members of the reform committee have been engaged from the very beginning of this Technical Assistance, attending both the December and May workshops. A key member of the Committee, Ahmad Alkhateh (Head of Reading Curriculum at the CC) said (in an individual evaluation interview conducted the last day of the workshop) that during the last workshop, he was “daily reporting and transferring knowledge received in the workshop to the Committee”. After the workshop, he joined the committee again and mentioned several times that the workshop “was extremely timely and a key milestone for the update of the reading curriculum”.

Ongoing Reform of teacher professional development for Early Grade teachers

The Teacher Education Improvement Project (TEIP), financed by the World Bank in Palestine between 2010 and 2015, has recently seen an Additional Financing (AF) approved in order to bring it to scale over the next three years. The AF is deepening its support to the National Institute for Educational Training (NIET) in order to implement a radical reform of the pre- and in-service teacher training system of Grade 1-4 teachers. In that respect, all three workshops in this TA program took place at the NIET headquarters, and therefore counted with the participation and engagement of several NIET staff. All sessions in Reading and Math benefited from the presence of both NIET staff and field supervisors, all of them key actors of the TEIP-AF project.

The Teacher Training development programs have benefited in very specific ways from these workshops. For example, during the Math workshop, there was extensive discussion about the alignment between curriculum, instruction and assessment and the crucial importance that teacher training program plays on implementing the new curriculum standards. This empowered NIET staff in front of their colleagues from other departments. Moreover, the team spent a full day of the workshop discussing unit assessments with the new standards and tried to elaborate on how NIET could develop a training module for teachers on designing formative assessments.

The May workshop on Reading had a more practical approach and made a significant contribution in bringing new evidence on practical notions (such as phonics and decoding) that have been studied in the scientific literature but are rarely included in teacher trainings in Arabic speaking countries. Both supervisors and NIET staff showed excitement about the knowledge acquired in terms of teaching Arabic language to early grade students. In words of a staff member from the Supervision and Quality Department (DSQ), *“the training was extremely beneficial and added new practical knowledge which complemented our experience in the field”*. She showed excitement towards the future hoping how these lessons could better incorporate in teacher training development, and suggested the World Bank team to repeat the final workshop with further materials, as it had been a great learning experience. She mentioned that soon after the workshop, she would *“start designing a new plan to coordinate effectively the work between the Curriculum Center, NIET and supervisors to better implement the curriculum”*.

Strengthen the capacity building in Curriculum and AED teams (Intermediate Indicator)

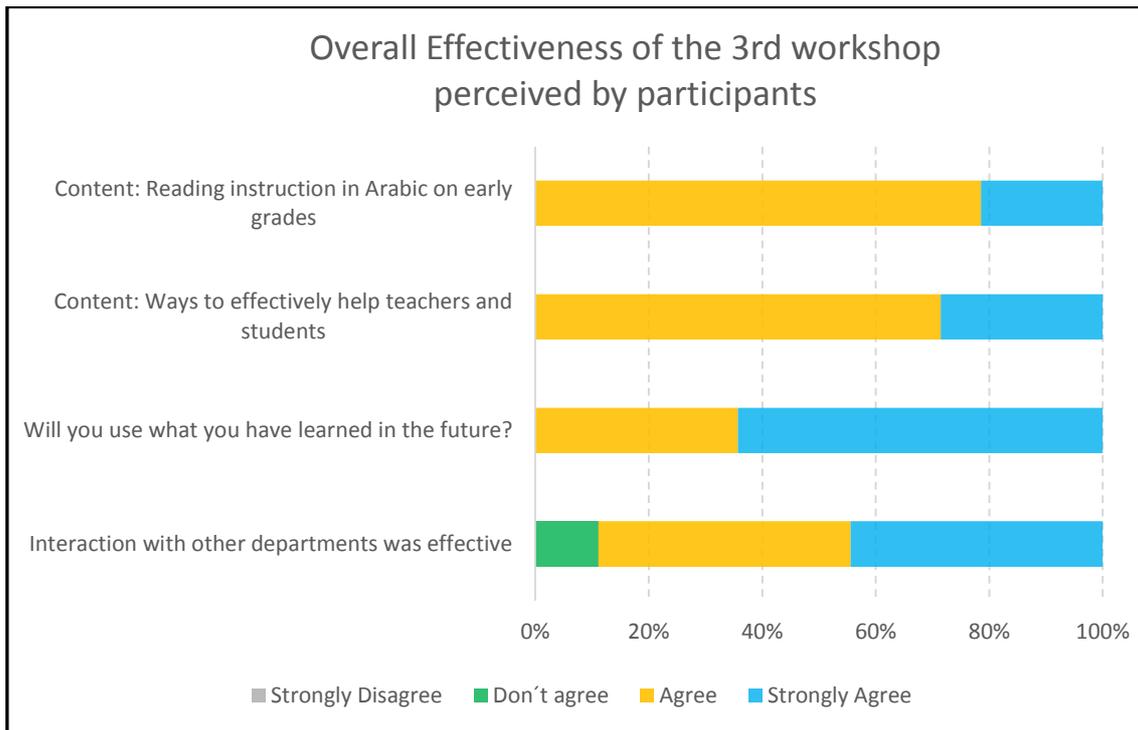
All three workshops have been successful in strengthening the capacity of the different Departments represented. The level of engagement as well as the quality of the experts who were able to adapt their sessions to specific demands from the departments enabled the appropriate conditions to strengthen the capacity of the client in both technical and organizational aspects.

The Math and Reading workshops made an important contribution in terms of strengthening the capacity to both develop (Reading) and implement (Math and Reading) the curriculum. The capacity was increased both from a theoretical (new knowledge) and practical (use of the knowledge in the field) perspective; but more importantly, it allowed the Curriculum Center to build a new institutional and professional environment of *collective intelligence* jointly with other departments (DP, NIET, DSQ) that have a strong presence in the field and therefore among practitioners.

Likewise, the interaction with the Assessment and Evaluation Department (AED), was critical since the new curriculum standards (key outcome of the ongoing curriculum reform) need to be translated and reflected in the national student assessment system, which is managed by AED. Prior to these workshops, coordination among all these departments took place via the Reform Committee, a body that is essentially political; hence, there was no technical coordination or dialogue among all these players related to the curriculum reform, with the experts of the Curriculum Center working very much in isolation.

The different avenues of impact on capacity building can be seen in Figure 1, which shows the results from a survey taken by the participants at the end of the third workshop (Reading). It is worth noting that participants overwhelmingly value the relevance of the workshop for their future work. Equally interesting is that a relatively small minority of participants still remains skeptical about the quality of technical interaction and collaboration among departments involved in the curriculum reform.

Figure 1. Capacity building of Reading workshop: content, use and collaboration



With regard to the technical assistance offered in Statistical analysis in the first two workshops, the participants (mostly from AED) covered topics which go from introductory statistics to multiple regression, weighting and complex survey design, data management issues, or evidence-based education policy making. The sessions have gone from theoretical explanations to practical exercises with EGRA and TIMSS datasets. At the end, the AED staff and its head Dr. Mohammed Matar expressed satisfaction and reiterated their interest in receiving further support in how to improve their data collection, how to analyze their data with modern statistical methods and how to better serve and inform the decision making processes of the policy-makers.

Engaging relevant actors

This series of workshops have been successful in engaging with the relevant actors that could benefit from the activity. First, the level of engagement has been high in all three workshops, with at least 20 medium and high-level technical staff from different ministerial and Governorate departments for each one of the workshops. Moreover, as already pointed out, the engagement was not only with the workshop experts but also with colleagues from other departments. In some cases, and this is a proof of their level of interest and motivation, staff attended sessions in which they previously had little level of knowledge (e.g. AED staff attended the May reading workshop).

Intermediate Outcome Indicators

Intermediate Outcome(s)	Indicator(s)
Development financing informed	Preparation of new operation informed, Existing operations informed, Government expenditure informed
Client capacity increased	Design capacity strengthened, Implementation capacity strengthened
Knowledge deepened	Facilitated exchange of best practice w/ clients, Disseminated best practices
Innovative approaches & solutions generated	New innovative approach fostered

Development financing informed – 6/10

TEIP-AF started implementation in January 2016. One of its most important activities is the production and implementation of teacher professional modules that integrate content knowledge (CK) with pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) in each of the curriculum areas. This TA has provided crucial inputs for such task. It has also created the appropriate coordination and collaboration conditions between the CC, NIET and DSQ in order to make sure that the Project adopts swiftly the new curriculum framework and standards in both Reading and Math.

Client Capacity increased – already described above – 8/10

Knowledge deepened – 8/10

The workshop enabled different teams to deepen their knowledge in key topics related to curriculum reform, foundations of reading, curriculum standards, teacher training, item drafting, summative assessments, statistics of education and data collection. The breadth and depth of knowledge covered and discussed among experts (and some key policy-makers) following international best practices exceeded all expectations. The reflection on the use of knowledge for their future work was extremely positive. More detailed information about can be seen in Annex 1.

Innovative approach and solutions generated – 7/10

The approach undertaken in these workshops has promoted coordination between different departments and allowed to build new spaces of collective and shared knowledge. This was the first time that these teams were sitting and working together discussing common challenges in the system. The workshop has definitely bridged the communication gap between these departments. The innovative approach that the team has followed has not only been an output in itself, but also an instrument to bring about other outputs, such as increasing the capacity and deepening the knowledge of different staff from both the Ministry HQ and the Governorates.

The workshops were arranged with a duration of one week each, involving daily sessions of five hours. The final agenda of the workshops always **followed** the demand that the team could identify from permanent contact with counterparts. This meant that, on the one hand, the nature and dynamics of the workshops were marked by flexibility to **ensure relevance and to maximize** benefits, and on the other, it forced the team to often navigate in uncertain and ambiguous circumstances as the demand from participants was not always explicitly expressed ahead by the counterparts.

Lessons Learned

- Curriculum reform is never a purely technical issue; therefore, it is not realistic to expect a smooth process where political economy issues are not a significant factor. The team somehow naively understood that mobilizing world-class consultants on reading and math in the early grades would suffice to ensure the full engagement of all actors involved and, even more importantly, the willingness to work together. This was of course not the case, even though the level of engagement was more than satisfactory. The key lesson learned is that, in this kind of TA process focused on curriculum reform, it is crucial to identify and choose the coordinating counterpart (among all the departments and agencies involved) and to make sure that there is high-level endorsement of such choice.
- Despite the difficulties faced due to the lack of a sufficiently strong tradition of coordination and collaboration among departments targeted by this TA, the success of the innovative approach undertaken in terms of fostering collaboration among Ministry departments and districts has become an important lesson for the future, both in Palestine and for other neighboring countries. Curriculum reform can no longer be conceived as a closed-door design exercise done by subject specialists that, once completed, is sent out for trainers, supervisors and practitioners to “pilot”. From the perspective of donors, moreover, the availability of competent international consultants, while an important asset and potential contribution, cannot be the only rationale to set out on a technical assistance endeavor.
- When discussing best practices in reforming the Reading curriculum in Arab countries, some of the participants in the workshops raised their concerns about the significant differences in terms of syllables and phonemes in the Arabic spoken in different countries of the region. They emphasized the need to learn more from neighboring countries such as Jordan, the UAE or Saudi Arabia in order to learn how these countries might have solved some of the issues with which they are struggling. This is a clear indication on the still untapped potential of regional cooperation in the area of Early Grade Reading. The Education for Competitiveness (E4C) initiative, a partnership between the World Bank and the Islamic Development Bank, has selected this area as one of the five pillars for its Action Plan over the next three years.

Next Steps

The team acknowledges that the Ministry of Education and Higher Education in Palestine needs more support in the elaboration and implementation of the curriculum in early grades, for both Math and Reading. Granted, the process has taken already a bit over two years and, at least at the design stage, it is very close to the end. However, preparation for implementation, teacher professional development, teaching and learning materials, and assessment instruments are largely still pending. More specifically,

- In Math, additional work is needed to develop the item writing guidelines, as well as the elaboration of sample items for conceptual understanding, procedural fluency, and application across the unit topics across the grades.
- In reading, assuming that the new curriculum will be finalized before the end of the summer, there will be a need in further supporting different departments for the implementation. Given the momentum created and broad interest that the series of workshops have generated, it would be timely to work with the Ministry in developing a structured reading instruction program in the early grades involving coaching, systematic phonics instruction, oral language instruction as well as grade appropriate classroom assessments.

Annex 1: Summary of Contents of the Workshops

Reading

In the December workshop, the presentations by Sana Tibi covered the following themes: (i) the importance of a Common Core Standards document in revising/developing the curriculum as per grade level; (ii) the linguistic characteristics of the Arabic language; (iii) the foundations of reading psychology; (iv) the guidelines to analyze the current curriculum; (v) and the difference between teaching mechanics of reading and reading texts. In sum, this first workshop laid the foundation for the needs of the different departments in the areas of curriculum evaluation, curriculum reform, common core standards, methods of teaching Arabic reading in the early grades (grades 1-4), and curriculum assessment tools in addition to developing resources including technological tools.

In May, under the leadership of Souhila Messaoud- Galusi, the content focused on best practices on reading instruction. The team covered several key topics of effective reading instruction in the early grades, which included: (i) defining key skills for reading acquisition - such as alphabetic skills, automatic word recognition, fluency and reading and oral comprehension;- (ii) defining decoding and understanding phonics instruction, with particular activities currently implemented in the classroom and the preparation of a scope and sequence for phonics reading and writing instruction; (iii) discussing the use of non-word for assessments vs. use of real words for instruction; and (iv) analyzing the role of language comprehension, vocabulary and comprehension strategies to teach reading comprehension.

Mathematics

In Math, Leanne Ketterlin Geller led different sessions on topics related to curriculum, teaching and assessment in Math with staff from CC, DSQ, NIET, DP and some members from AED. The first two and a half days of the workshop were important to receive updates on recent developments on the preparation of the Common Core Standards in Mathematics (CCSS-M), the need to authoring of Math textbooks in the coming months, and the development of unit planning and assessment instruments in line to the new Standards. In the last two and a half days the team worked on: (i) focusing on the alignment between curriculum, instruction, and assessment in Math; (ii) defining, classifying, and writing math items that represent conceptual understanding, procedural fluency, and application; (iii) and discussing and practicing test development procedures that can be used to create the unit assessments for the textbooks.

Statistics/ Data Analysis

Michael Costello led two of the series of workshops mostly working with the Assessment and Evaluation Department (AED). The December workshop covered basic topics related to introductory statistics, statistical discussions with EGRA data and calculating effect size. The second workshop allowed the participants to deepen and expand the knowledge in these topics as well as being introduced to weighting and complex survey design, simple and multiple linear regressions with education statistics, and data management issues. During the last day of the workshop, Lucas Gortazar (Coordinator and Assessment and Evaluation expert) led a session on applications of analysis to education policy-making by using TIMSS data for the West Bank.

Annex 2: Materials of workshops

The following set of outputs are attached for each of the workshops.

Workshop 1 – December 13-17

Coordinated by Lucas Gortazar.

Two parallel sessions led by Michael Costello (Statistics) and Sana Tibi (Reading)

- Agenda
- List of Participants
- Materials and Presentations
- Trip report by Specialists
- Feedback Survey responses
- Workshop Reflection and Recommendations for Action Output Document.
- BTOR

Workshop 2 – February 28- March 3

Coordinated by Lucas Gortazar.

Two parallel sessions led by Michael Costello (Statistics) and Leanne K. Geller (Math)

- Agenda
- List of Participants
- Materials and Presentations
- Trip Report by Specialists
- BTOR

Workshop 3 – May 29 - June 2

Coordinated by Lucas Gortazar.

Led by Souhila Messaoud-Galusi (Reading)

- Agenda
- List of Participants
- Materials and Presentations
- Trip Report by Specialist
- Survey responses
- Key
- BTOR