EdData II

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Assessing Early Grade Reading Skills in Latin America and the Caribbean

Assessing Early Grade Reading Skills: The EGRA Application

The ability to read with understanding is one of the most fundamental skills a child can learn. Research evidence indicates that learning to read both early and at a sufficient rate are essential for learning to read well. Acquiring literacy becomes more difficult as students grow older. Children who do not learn to read in the first few grades are more likely to repeat grades and eventually drop out, and the gap between early readers and nonreaders increases over time. Recognizing the importance of the early acquisition of fundamental reading skills, the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) is designed to easily and accurately assess how well children in the early grades of primary school are acquiring key reading skills, and, if not, to determine which areas of instruction need improvement,

EGRA Applications in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC)

The first EGRA application in LAC (funded by the World Bank) took place in Peru in 2005. Since then, EGRA has been applied in nine different languages in nine LAC countries—Peru (2005 and 2007, Spanish and Quechua, respectively), Jamaica (2007, English), Guatemala (2008, Spanish), Guyana (2008, English), Honduras (2008 and 2009, Spanish), Nicaragua (2008 and 2009, Spanish, Miskito, Panamahka, and Creole), Argentina (2009, Spanish), Brazil (2009, Portuguese), and Haiti (2009, French and Haitian Creole).

Administering an EGRA in Nicaragua. Photo: RTI staff.

EGRA's relative ease of application and potential for providing rapid and accurate information on foundational reading skills has resulted in ministries of education and other education stakeholders' use of the tool for various purposes. In LAC, EGRA has been used in several different ways, including (1) as a system-level diagnostic of reading skills at the national level, with the objective of promoting policy dialogue around reading instruction (Guyana, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Peru); (2) as an outcome measure to assess the impact of educational interventions (Guatemala and Honduras); (3) as part of school management and school effectiveness studies (Guatemala, Honduras, Peru, and Jamaica); and (4) as a tool for classroom-based assessments (Argentina and Brazil).

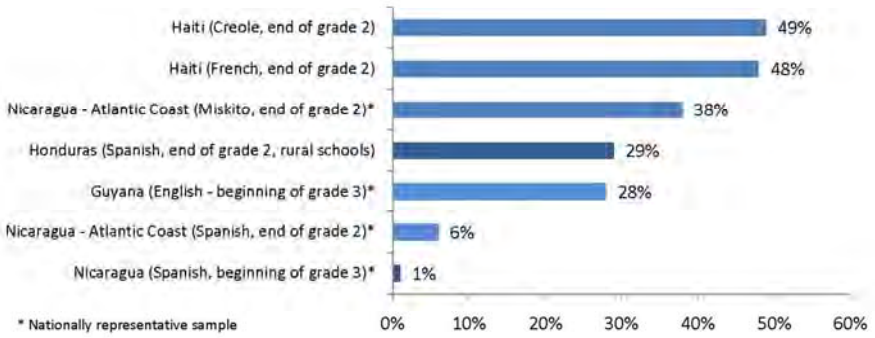
Key Findings

The LAC EGRA results tell us whether students in the region are progressing toward achieving the goal of reading fluency and comprehension and, therefore, whether they are on target to transition from "learning to read" to "reading to learn." These results foreshadow whether students will be able to read with comprehension by the end of primary school. Specifically, the results tell us whether students are able to read at all, whether they read with sufficient fluency to comprehend a simple text passage, and where gaps exist regarding specific reading skills. *Overall, EGRA*

results show that in many LAC countries, after two years of instruction, students have not acquired a basic level of reading proficiency that will allow them to transition from learning to read to reading to learn in later grades.

Nonreaders. Exhibit 1 shows the percentage of students (from a selection of countries) tested at the end of second grade (or the beginning of third grade) who were unable to read a single word in the reading fluency component of the assessment. This part of the assessment requires students to read a short paragraph in the language in which they are being taught to read. Results show that in Haiti, Guyana, and rural schools in Honduras, between one-third and one-half of the students are unable to read a single word. In addition, there are differences in student performance among regions within a country. For example, students attending schools in the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua are much less likely to be able to read at all than students in the rest of the country.

Exhibit 1. Percentage of non-readers, end of grade 2 or beginning of grade 3



* Nationally representative sample

Reading Fluency and Comprehension. The reading fluency and comprehension section of EGRA assesses how well children are able to read and comprehend a short narrative text passage, calibrated for the second grade level. *EGRA applications in LAC show that a significant percentage of students in the early grades are not able to fully comprehend what they read.* Overall, the percentage of students who can read with 80% comprehension by the end of second grade or the beginning of third grade is fairly low across countries and languages—3.5% of Miskito-speaking students in the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua, 32% of English-speaking students in Guyana, and 35% of Spanish-speaking students in rural Honduran schools. Reading comprehension levels are higher among Spanish-speaking students in Nicaragua, with 58% of students in the Atlantic Coast and 78% in the rest of Nicaragua reading with at least 80% comprehension.

Using EGRA Results to Improve Reading Instruction

EGRA applications in LAC have raised awareness of early grade reading challenges and have been used to inform the development of interventions to improve instruction. First, EGRAs have been used to monitor the performance of schools participating in improvement programs. For example, EGRA applications conducted in Guatemala (2008), Haiti (2009), and Honduras (2009) provided information on student performance in schools supported by Save the Children, the World Bank's Education for All program, and CARE, respectively. Second, EGRA results have been used to promote policy dialogue about how well countries are providing children with opportunities to acquire reading skills. For example, in Nicaragua (2008), post-EGRA activities included conducting capacity-building workshops with ministry officials, implementing a teacher training program on reading, developing a "best-practice" video demonstrating good reading instruction to support teacher training, developing a public awareness video to explain the importance of reading, and implementing a social campaign to increase community interest and participation in improving reading.

More Information

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EdData II is implemented by RTI International, EHC-E-00-04-00004-00, September 2004–November 2013.