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FIRST PRINCIPLES: DESIGNING EFFECTIVE EARLY READING PROGRAMS

DIGEST

Strong reading skills provide the foundation for academic success and ultimately for effective participation in society. Acquiring these skills begins early and is supported by high quality early reading programs. Access to such programs for all students plays an important role in national education strategies, especially those related to reducing poverty and improving health.

The First Principles¹ that follow provide important guidance for designing and implementing high quality early grade reading instructional programs. The First Principles emphasize that *oral language is the foundation of early acquisition of the reading skills children need to succeed*, while also recognizing the *importance of incorporating cognitive, social, and emotional factors into the process of becoming literate*. Together, they provide the foundation for children’s

¹ This guide provides a shortened version of a larger document; see Roskos, Strickland, Hasse, & Malik (2009).



Credit: Cassandra Jesse/AIR

academic success. High quality instruction that adheres to these principles ensures that all students, regardless of their home language and background experiences, will acquire the foundational skills and understandings they need for success.

This document goes further than presenting the eight principles of strong early grade reading programs by explaining steps for implementing them and challenges educators often face in establishing strong early reading programs. It also presents specific strategies for overcoming the challenges and for measuring success. As a brief but comprehensive guide, the First Principles is intended to be useful for a variety of settings to help educators and development personnel establish early reading programs that represent high standards and also meet local needs.

8

PRINCIPLES OF EARLY READING PROGRAMS

There are eight basic principles for high quality early reading programs. It is helpful to think of the principles as clusters of elements that cumulatively create a strong foundation for young learners' reading development and on-going academic success.

The first cluster of principles concerns the actual **reading program** offered to young learners:

1. Build on young learners' oral language foundation.
2. Create a print-rich environment.
3. Provide or expand access to books, texts, and activities.
4. Embed the reading program within the curriculum and the national standards.

The second cluster concerns the **supports needed** for early reading programs to meet their full potential:

5. Engage families and communities.
6. Provide support to create well-prepared teachers and supervisors.

The final cluster concerns the **use of data**, both in the classroom as a way to monitor and guide students' learning but also at a more general level to ensure that programs are working.

7. Use assessment systems to facilitate learning.
8. Build in evaluations to focus on what works.

The eight principles are explained next.

CLUSTER 1: THE EARLY READING PROGRAM

Each principle in this cluster contributes to the development and implementation of early reading programs that can meet the needs of young learners, regardless of their background experiences.

1. Build on young learners' oral language foundation.

Regardless of their backgrounds, the greatest strength young learners bring to school is their proficiency in their home language. Their vocabularies and their knowledge of grammatical structures allow them to express their feelings and their needs, and the "cognitive energy" they have used to gain proficiency can be channeled toward learning to read and toward transition to the official language of the nation. Empirical research also establishes that children who learn to read in their mother tongue tend to read sooner and better than do those who learn to read in a second language, and ultimately demonstrate greater academic success (Verhoeven, 2009).

ABOUT THIS FIRST PRINCIPLES

This *First Principles of Designing Effective Early Reading Programs Digest* provides an overview of strategies for promoting early reading in developing countries. The principles, steps, and indicators are primarily meant to guide program designs, including the development of requests for and subsequent review of proposals, the implementation of program activities, and the development of performance management plans, evaluations, and research studies. The *First Principles* are intended to help USAID education officers specifically, as well as other stakeholders— including staff in donor agencies, government officials, and staff working for international and national non-governmental organizations— who may be tasked with promoting, developing, and implementing gender-focused programs. Early reading is being given special importance in the international development arena as it is seen as the fundamental building block for all academic learning. The guidance in this document is meant to be used and adapted for a variety of settings to help USAID officers, educators and implementers overcome the numerous challenges in addressing gender issues and understand the importance of working on policy environments, and of the multiple entry points for creating or improving early reading programs. The last section provides references for those who would like to learn more about issues and methods for promoting effective early reading.

In multilingual environments, it is important that connections be made among students' home language, the language in their community, the language of instruction, and the local written language. It is also important that the students themselves recognize and appreciate these connections. Building on prior knowledge with words the child already knows and using print materials with familiar vocabulary and illustrated with familiar objects from daily life, helps speed children's transition to print awareness—the understanding that something on a page represents something in real life—and to reading comprehension. Understanding this link leads to development of the concept of word in print, without which students struggle to learn how to transform written words into sounds (or decoding).

Many beginning readers master the task of matching letters and sounds, without learning that this decoding process is supposed to lead to recognizable words, whose meanings they already know. Their oral reading may sound correct, but they cannot provide definitions of words or articulate the meaning of complete sentences. Without this grasp of meaning—the learners' aha! experience that print is really a form of talk written down—students will never become strong readers. It goes without saying that this important understanding is easier for young learners to develop in the home languages in which they are most comfortable and fluent. Building a strong oral foundation contributes to children's sense of accomplishment as they are able to read and recognize words that are already familiar and relate to the world around them, thereby providing enjoyment and motivation for future learning.

Without a strong base in the oral language, even if the child is able to learn the letters and sound them out, he or she will still be lacking an essential component of reading: comprehension. Where policies and/or circumstances insist on instruction in L2 (second language) in the early grades, “explicit teaching of the L2 beginning with oral skills allows students to learn the new language through communication rather than memorization” (Benson, 2004; 2). In addition, L2 should be taught systematically so that learners can gradually transfer skills from the familiar language to the unfamiliar one.



Credit: Cassandra Jesse/AIR

2. Create a print-rich environment.

Beginning readers thrive when they are surrounded by books. The ideal classroom has a quiet library corner and plentiful materials for reading instruction, such as leveled texts, decodable books, big books, and practice exercises.² The materials allow for independent reading, shared reading, guided reading, and teacher read-alouds. The books should represent different genres—narrative, poetry, and informational—and should be colorful and well illustrated, vary in difficulty to accommodate different levels of readers, and be culturally appropriate for the learners. This is the ideal.

² *Leveled texts* are those texts that start out with few and simple words and become progressively more difficult. *Decodable books* are those that are specifically geared toward helping beginning readers decode, or sound out, words. *Big books* are simply books in a large print font so that children in a classroom can see the words from a distance. For example, if a teacher is reading aloud to a class full of students, children from several feet away will still be able to make out the words and follow along, thereby enhancing student engagement in the text. Practice exercises can vary, but may include flashcards or games involving words students are exposed to during class.

However, children all over the world have learned to read in classes that may lack rich, full libraries because their teachers have created *print-rich environments*. Teachers who understand the value of a print-rich environment certainly do try to secure books and other printed material for their students' independent, instructional, and recreational reading. Strong teachers also know that they can produce print to enrich their classrooms. Teacher-made texts include charts with stories the students have dictated or the teacher has found; daily "morning messages" to be shared; classroom rules to be reviewed each day; and informational resources such as days of the week or numbers. Public displays of students' work and friendly competition may engage children's emotions and their minds. When students use word walls, see displays of the alphabet, read labels and calendars, read and write letters, and follow directions and signs in the environment around them,³ they begin to appreciate how valuable reading is in everyday life.

Learning materials that engage more than one sense increase the number of ways children experience print and the speed with which they internalize it. For example, wooden alphabet blocks or felt letters engage both touch and sight; big books engage sight and hearing. Teachers can be encouraged to connect reading and popular culture beyond school (e.g., favorite films, computer games, sports). Few classrooms in developing countries have this range of resources, however, and local materials and local labor can often produce rudimentary materials at fairly low cost.

Teachers can turn to community groups to help produce locally relevant materials that may have special significance to young learners because they are passing on local stories, history, and traditions. In short, successful teachers establish and reinforce a classroom culture that demonstrates, models, and values reading.

3 "These signs and labels also referred to as environmental print, help students with disabilities make connections between information they know and the new information given to them in the form of writing." (The Access Center, 7. Available at http://www.k8access-center.org/training_resources/documents/Literacy%20Rich%20Environments.pdf).

3. Provide or expand access to books, texts, and activities.

As Principle 2 states, teachers can create print-rich classroom environments even when they do not have abundant classroom libraries and resources. Principle 3 is closely related.

A good reading program will in most cases require supplemental materials and activities beyond those provided through the curriculum. Figure 1 helps to illustrate some of the kinds of supplemental materials that can be developed to enhance the curriculum in different environments. A characteristic of successful early reading programs is teachers who take every opportunity to encourage students to read and to write for authentic meaning-making reading experiences: for pleasure, to be informed, and to perform a task. Ideally, materials should be culturally appropriate, good quality, and varied in difficulty to accommodate different levels of readers. Teachers should be encouraged to create a classroom culture that facilitates using and sharing books and texts and incorporating reading and writing into lessons in varying ways. If students draw a picture, they should be encouraged to write an annotation; if they have listened to an oral read aloud, they can write a retelling to share with others; if they are going on a trip outside the school, they can collectively read the "class rules" for such an experience. If teachers have "big books" to read to the class, individuals can take turns pointing out words on the expanded pages; so too students can come to the board to contribute ideas to a written "daily message." Teachers can model their own use of reading by consulting printed materials for "directions" or "guidelines" to show students how useful print can be for everyday activities. In classes with students at multiple reading levels, readers who are more proficient can become tutors to the younger or less proficient students, thereby reinforcing both students' skills.

Vocabulary expansion should be a major focus of the early grades, and teachers can reinforce this with class or individual "word banks." Activities to generate synonyms and antonyms or "other ways to say something" expand not just students' actual storehouse of words but also the breadth and depth of their concepts. Reading from multiple sources, beyond just one textbook, can also expand concept and vocabulary development as well as lay the foundation for critical thinking (Gambrell, Morrow, & Pressley, 2007). Recognizing the many ways to express their ideas and thoughts can further prepare them for

the transition from home language to national language. The real goal is to show reading and writing as dynamic, useful, and obtainable skills, skills that build on and extend students' oral language abilities. Thus, students transfer their classroom reading learning to real life because they have engaged in meaningful reading learning in the classroom.

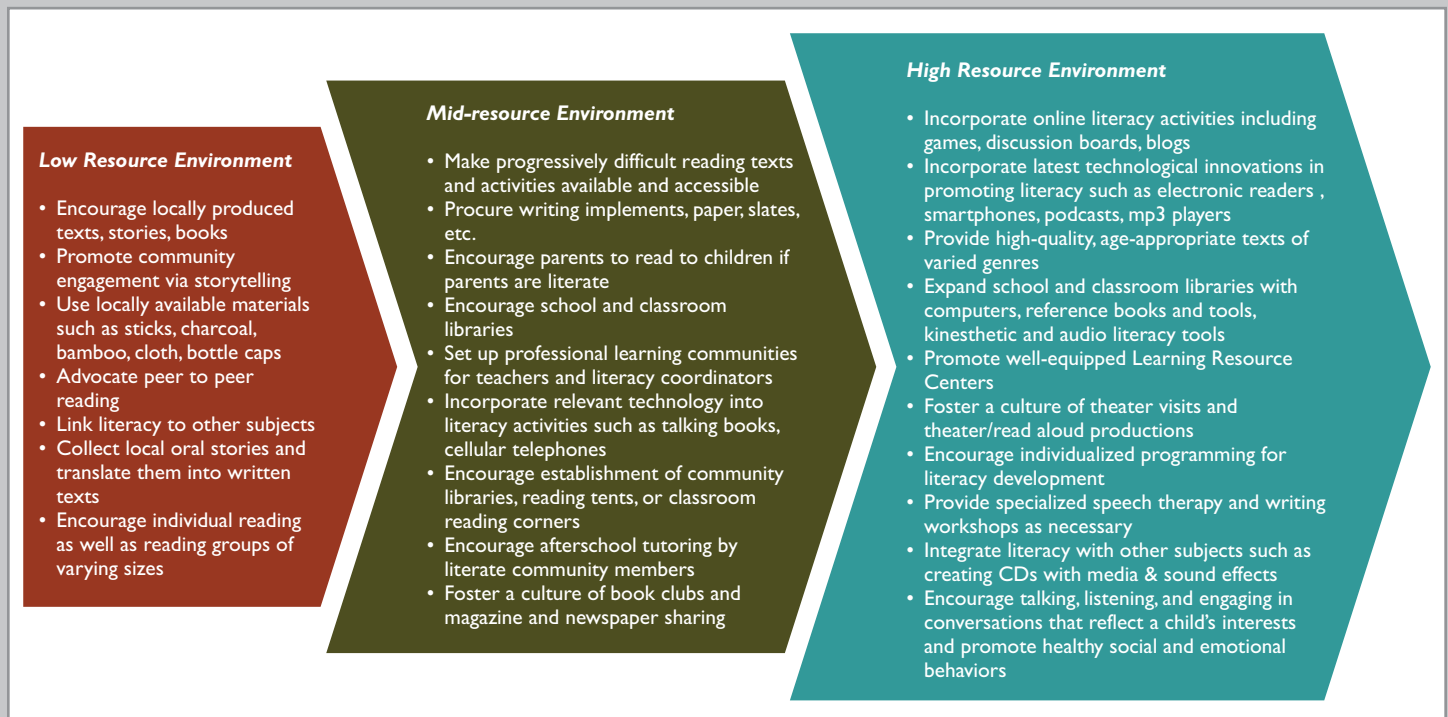
Trade books, or commercially available storybooks, written by local authors and published by local industries should contribute to a growing supply of books for independent and recreational reading, resources permitting. In low-resource environments, where access to print is a challenge, programs can encourage students and teachers to create locally produced books and stories using indigenous materials to relate stories and information relevant to

the local context.⁴ Partnerships with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and private organizations should be sought to increase availability of print material.

4. Embed the reading program within the curriculum and national standards.

Curriculum for a successful early reading program develops the concepts, strategies, and skills necessary for early reading. However, it does not do this in a vacuum: Learning to read and write is not an end in itself. Proficiency in reading and writing should prepare students to meet their nation's broader educational goals. The organization and content for early reading programs should provide an explicit link to a country's overarching national literacy goals as

Figure 1: Reading Activities for Low, Mid and High Resource Environments⁵



4 Examples of locally produced materials can be found here: <http://www.equip123.net/equip1/mesa/docs/TALULAR-UsersGuide.pdf>

5 Figure 1 illustrates different types of activities, in line with the aforementioned principles, suggested to promote reading in three environments: low-, medium-, and high-resource. Each successive environment should try to incorporate activities from the ones preceding it. These activities are not meant to be all-encompassing, nor are they meant to be prescriptive, but merely examples of activities that might be contextually appropriate, according to availability of resources.



well as national development goals. Any early reading program should ideally support the language curriculum as specified by the Ministry of Education (MOE) as well as be integrated across other subjects. Where gaps exist in the language curriculum, the linkages made to other subjects and their corresponding lessons could help strengthen the language instruction. A teacher's knowledge of the entire curriculum should be the framework for literacy instruction, and should be the basis for any alterations to the lesson plans to address changing student needs.

Teachers can be encouraged to make these connections with other subjects and build on prior knowledge even in a low-resource environment. Thematic lessons are one such approach to doing this, by reading and writing on a topic related to science, social studies, or another subject. It must be recognized, however, that teachers may have to be more flexible with their daily teaching structure if they are trying to implement reading activities during other subjects.

CLUSTER 2: SUPPORTS NEEDED FOR THE EARLY READING PROGRAM

5. Engage families and communities.

Successful early reading programs create bridges from school to home, and home back to school. That is why it is so important for teachers to continuously build relationships with parents by sharing progress data and through regular school events and celebrations. Including family members in school management and parent-teacher committees, and in community councils and local advisory groups, demonstrates to parents that their opinions and

skills are valued and appreciated. Technology —such as cell phones or other resources—can enhance home and community involvement because the technology reaches “outside” the school building to make the efforts of teachers and administrators more accessible.

Committees can get involved in a number of ways to promote literacy beyond increasing the number and quality of print material. For example, they can encourage and support tutoring programs. Contests for writing, spelling, and reading can build community pride in the achievement of their children. When parents are literate, it is especially important to encourage them to read to and with their children. Even parents who have limited literacy abilities can still be urged to create a reading space or designate a specific time each day for their child to read. Parents can ask children questions if the child reads a story out loud, suggest that their child create a shopping list, or otherwise engage their children in literacy activities. Efforts to engage parents and community members can be especially important when these adults have had few school experiences themselves. When they find the school open and welcoming of what they have to offer, they are far more likely to support education within their homes and to reinforce the value of “book learning” to their children. This kind of support from homes and communities that nurture young learners contributes to the ultimate sustainability of early reading programs. Engaging the community in such a manner is more likely to ensure sustainability of early reading programs, and encourages a literate culture beyond the school environment.

6. Provide support to create well-prepared teachers and supervisors.

Successful teachers in early reading programs knowledgeable, flexible and strategic in helping children learn to read. They know how to organize lessons despite large class sizes and limited resources. They should be able to provide students with scaffolded instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension so that students develop positive feelings toward reading and possess the skills needed for independent reading and writing.

Teachers cannot do this on their own. Training does not end at the conclusion of a teacher-training program. Successful reading programs treat their teachers as respected professionals. Teachers are encouraged to work together and take charge of their own learning and

development as they coach one another and share best practices. Ongoing training opportunities on topics such as adapting programs and materials to local conditions foster continued professional growth.

Where possible, early grade teachers should receive formal instruction and practicums in early reading to enable them to be knowledgeable, flexible and strategic in helping children learn to read. They should also be guided by headteachers or supervisors in their efforts to improve early literacy. These headteachers and supervisors should be encouraged to help teachers facilitate effective reading programs, assist with engaging community members, obtaining books and texts, etc.

CLUSTER 3: USE OF DATA

7. Use assessment systems to facilitate learning.

“Data-driven decision making” has become an education buzzphrase, but in successful early reading programs, it refers to the important process of collecting and using a multitude of data points about young learners’ progress from pre-reader to proficiency. One example of an early reading assessment is the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA), which is designed to orally assess basic foundation skills for literacy. It is meant to be a simple diagnostic of individual student progress in reading. Its results can be used by ministry personnel to identify specific needs within schools and to develop instructional approaches for improving basic reading skills (e.g., poor letter naming results may indicate the need for additional alphabet practice).⁶ Other assessment tools are available or can be developed for specific context.

Teachers can collect formative data as part of their usual instructional routines (i.e., as they observe students, administer short quizzes, or analyze work products). This kind of data helps teachers make short-term instructional decisions such as pacing of daily lessons, grouping of students for extra help, and determining which students need reteaching of certain skills. Students acquire reading skills at different rates, and this kind of data helps teachers differentiate instruction to be sure all students get the teaching they need to stay on track for proficiency. Student self-evaluation can also be important in that students

become aware and invested in their own assessment and development of literacy skills.

Standardized tests are used to collect other data, often referred to as *summative data*, that allow for comparison across groups that have taken the same test. These tests are used less frequently and allow for systematic collection and analysis of student progress at individual and aggregate levels. This kind of data can inform policy and funding decisions and allow for comparisons across schools within a region or the nation as a whole.

Collecting and using data on reading skills benefit teachers and students because the data can help teachers identify each student’s strengths and weaknesses. Teachers should be encouraged to assess both reading processes and products.⁷ Teachers can then communicate these results to parents and family members and enlist their help in supporting learners’ growth. Communicating the results of assessments to parents helps them understand how their children are progressing and often makes them feel more comfortable in providing help at home. Student self-evaluation is also important so that students become aware and invested in their own assessment and development of literacy skills. Making student assessment data usable and actionable for families helps to identify strengths and weaknesses in student reading and writing that families can work on together.

8. Build in evaluations to focus on what works.

As stated in Principle 7, successful early reading programs include ongoing data collection and analysis to inform systematic program decision making; but systematic analysis of data should extend beyond classroom- or school-based curriculum and instructional revision. A solid understanding of what is and is not working should drive management decisions about literacy programs and ultimately inform policies on accountability and funding. Formative and summative program evaluation ensures that programs adapt to changing conditions and encourage ownership and sustainability within the local community. Evaluation data also helps local decision makers benchmark their progress against broader regional or national norms.

6 EGRA Frequently Asked Questions: http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNADR065.pdf

7 “The information provided by product assessments can help us determine students’ achievement in relation to important reading goals, ranging from benchmark reading performances to content-area learning” (Gambrell, Morrow, & Pressley, 2007, 12).

5 STEPS FOR IMPLEMENTING FIRST PRINCIPLES OF EARLY READING

Children learn best how to read and write through active teaching and learning that foster hands-on learning and active participation with the content. Programs must be carefully planned if they are going to meet this criterion. Understanding the eight First Principles is the start of this planning process.

Several tools help to develop and sustain active teaching and learning in early literacy programs. These tools are cited in the steps for implementation below and are located at the conclusion of this digest.

Planning an early reading program—whether to start a new program or enhance an existing one—consists of several important steps.

1. Conduct a baseline assessment of current early reading programs in the local setting.

Chances are good that each community has some form of early literacy program, and new planning should begin by finding out what has been in place. Collecting information about existing programs amounts to a baseline assessment, and this process can be guided by the set of questions provided in the full First Principles Guide (Roskos et al., 2009, p. 15). Each question is accompanied by suggestions for the kind of evidence that will show whether the local program has been meeting the First Principles of a strong program. The questions, linked to the eight principles, can be adapted to reflect local priorities and needs. It is important to know (a) how effectively students are learning basic learning skills, (b) which skills they are learning, (c) how the structure and makeup of the language of instruction impact how reading needs to be taught, (d) what skills teachers have in early reading instruction, and (e) how the curriculum is constructed to support reading instruction.

The baseline assessment can be conducted as small-group discussions or focus groups. Plan to give the participants—most likely local teachers, program developers, and community leaders—a copy of the guide prior to meeting with them. As they answer the questions, encourage them to talk about not only existing programs but also about their ideas for changes. Record their responses to each question and look for evidence of the First Principles in the existing program; this information will provide the baseline for developing or improving a local early literacy program.

2. Form an early reading program committee in the local setting or school.

This action is a clear reflection of First Principle 5: Engage families and communities. Involving families and community members from the beginning increases the likelihood that they will understand long-term education goals, be enthusiastic about what the program seeks to accomplish, and support the teachers and administrators providing service to young students. Here, the basic principles of community engagement apply (see Kintz, 2010).

USEFUL TOOLS

The following tools can be found in *First Principles for Early Grades Reading Programs in Developing Countries* (Roskos et al., 2009):

First Principles Guide (p. 15)

Active Teaching Rubric (p. 16)

Active Learning Classroom Indicators (p. 17)

First Principles Self-Review Tool (p. 20)

Suggestions for developing a Resource Center can be found here:

<http://www.equip123.net/equip1/mesa/docs/ResourceCentreGuide.pdf>

UNESCO's *Module on Teaching Reading in Primary Schools* (2004) provides an easy-to-follow guide to develop primary school teachers' skills in teaching early reading, available here: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001351/135162eo.pdf>.

To initiate the program planning and monitoring, take advantage of existing structures in the school, such as a strong parent–teacher group, or form a new committee with local input. Once in place, lay out the committee’s responsibilities and meeting schedule. Provide the group with a reader-friendly summary of local responses to the First Principles set of baseline questions. This literacy program committee should work to enhance literacy in the community and school by building on the information gathered.

3. Identify desired results of a local early reading program and clarify priorities.

The first step for committee members is to envision the desired changes to their *local* program. They can then move on to determining reasonable procedures for making changes and setting forth the time period and scale of the changes. For example, a committee may envision a 5-year goal to respond to beginning reading instruction in a sufficiently resourced classroom where most children are making progress in learning to read. A district-level committee may decide that they want to build a districtwide literacy program. Committees need to establish *challenging*, but *achievable* long-term priorities. Working backward from these, they identify short-term goals and objectives related to longer term aims. They need to consider what new knowledge and skills are essential to achieving long-term improvements.

Several of the tools included in the First Principles Guide can help committee members do their work efficiently. (See the text box.) Concrete examples of current successful early grade reading programs in the region, country, or neighboring countries can provide models to inform new programs or revise old ones.

4. Plan actions to achieve goals

When committee members have established their educational priorities and short-term goals, they can move forward to create a blueprint for action. With this blueprint, they can develop an action plan that describes the work to be done. Specifically, they need to identify:

- The **overall time frame** for implementing changes to the early literacy program and for determining whether goals have been achieved
 - The time frame must be reasonable in terms of both intermediate and long-term goals.
- The **sequence of support** that teachers will need to learn and implement new practices
 - Teachers benefit from initial professional development and ongoing support on literacy instructional practices, the curriculum, and the national standards.
- The **resources** needed to create print rich environments and that give students abundant print opportunities
 - Resources may need to be replenished frequently.
- **Persons who are responsible** for the different activities that will contribute to achieving goals
 - A mechanism for supporting the responsible individuals and also holding them accountable is important too.

5. Determine the evidence needed to show achievement of desired results that reflect First Principles.

The most striking “evidence” of achievement of the desired goals will be increases in students’ literacy achievement: more students who learn to read and write in their home languages, make successful transitions to instruction in English, and continue to grow as readers and writers. However, accomplishing this goal may take a few years, and both the planners and implementers of the new literacy program can establish periodic checkpoints to gauge intermediate progress and make any necessary midcourse changes and adjustments.

The “What to Look For” section of the set of questions in the full *First Principles in Early Reading Guide* provides a starting place for committee members thinking about the evidence they need to document results. Depending on the local plan, the committee members may change, omit, or add to the suggested evidence. The next section provides additional guidance by providing specific indicators of success.

SUGGESTED INDICATORS OF SUCCESS

The indicators of success that follow have an evaluative function and can guide management decisions about design and implementation of literacy programs. The success of literacy programs can be evaluated on four broad dimensions, the first of which is students' steady progress toward achievement goals, as couched within the local literacy program, regardless of whether the program has been developed from scratch or a previous program has been enhanced. The other sets of indicators refer to the program itself, the supports provided for program implementation, and use of different kinds of data.

The principles, steps, and challenges describe important elements to consider when designing and implementing an early reading program. The indicators of success provide some common and recommended tools for measuring effectiveness and impact of early reading programs. These indicators have an evaluative function to guide management decisions about design and implementation of reading programs, but are also meant to be adapted as necessary to local programs and contexts.

Increased availability of materials in learning environment necessary for reading and writing

- Ratio of paper and pencils to students is increased
- Ratio of textbooks and exercise books to students is increased
- Percentage of students who practice literacy skills outside of school is increased
- Ratio of number of books (not including textbooks) to students available in school library is increased
- Increased number of home and school reading activities
- Increased community support for literacy measured by number of activities (e.g., storytelling, after school tutoring, literacy fairs),.
- Increased ratio of locally developed reading materials to students
- Increased display of student work (on doors, desks and walls and in folders, baskets, and bins)

Improved policy environment for promotion of early reading

- Presence of policy documents stating reading as a goal aligned with national development agenda
- Presence of developmentally and linguistically appropriate written curriculum aligned with assessment standards
- Existence of a process for planning and revision of curriculum that promotes successful reading outcomes

Improved teacher skills in active, child-centered learning methods specific to reading and writing

- Increased number of teachers conduct learner-centered teaching, demonstrating knowledge and skills appropriate for reading education
- Increased number of teachers account for both cognitive and affective factors in student performance and nurture student skills
- Structures are in place for educator development in reading assessment
- Increased number of teachers guide practice reading in groups of various sizes
- Increased number of teachers provide scaffolded instruction whereby students gradually read and write independently



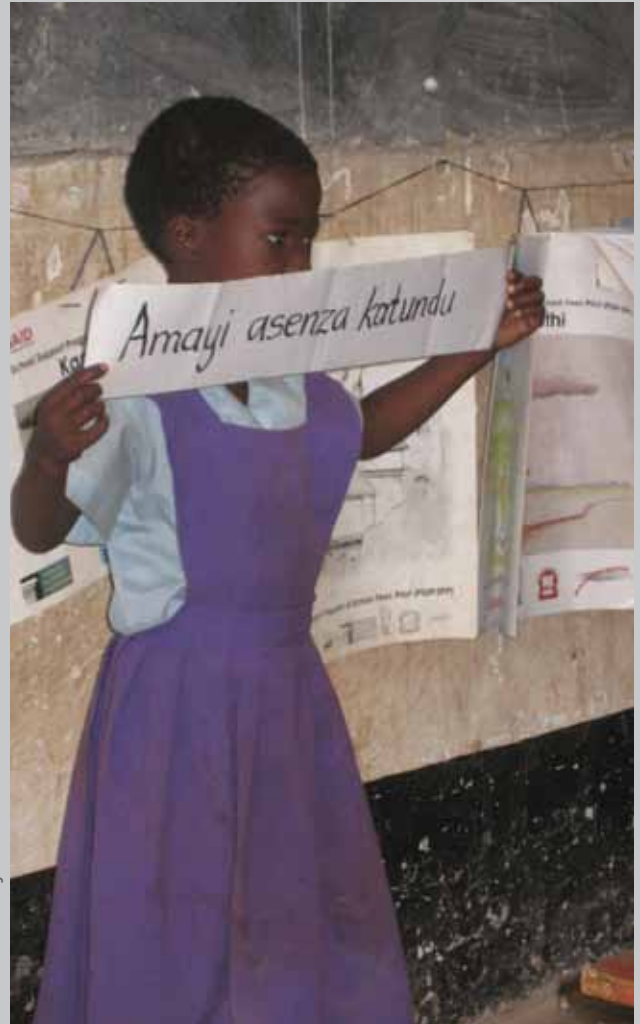
Credit: American Institutes for Research

- Increased number of teachers incorporate word study and phonics into reading and writing instruction, by providing students with activities and opportunities that bridge spoken and written language.
- Increased number of teachers provide substantial instruction in reading and writing (75–90 minutes per day), explicit as well as infused within other subjects
- Increased number of teachers provide documented and appropriate learning expectations
- Increased number of teachers are engaged in a professional learning community that promotes reading
- Increased number of teachers use assessment tools to provide guidance in lesson planning for reading
- Increased number of teachers use assessment strategies to provide guidance in lesson planning for reading

Reliable and valid assessment tools and strategies to measure learning achievement.

These tools and strategies need to provide diagnostic information to the instructor to improve instruction (formative assessment), as well as measure the degree to which students are learning (summative assessment).

- Increased number of students who successfully learn to read and write as evidenced by attainment of benchmarks relevant to skills, comprehension, and application (could use tools such as EGRA or locally developed curriculum-based assessments)
- Increased number of students show progress in reading and writing, loosely according to the following developmentally appropriate progression (the first three stages are most relevant to early reading).



Credit: Cassandra Jesse/AIR

Student Progress Toward Reading Goals

Research on reading acquisition has produced a progression of skills and understandings that students need to become proficient readers and writers. Most students make progress toward these goals, but they may do so at differing rates of speed. Exhibit 1 provides an overview of a research-based developmental continuum for reading learning.

EXHIBIT 1: STAGES OF READING DEVELOPMENT

STAGE	LEARNER SKILLS AND ABILITIES
PRESCHOOL EXPERIENCES: In children's home language	
<i>Stage 0:</i> Birth to Grade 1	Gains control of oral language; relies heavily on pictures in text; pretends to read; recognizes rhyme
EARLY SCHOOL EXPERIENCES: In children's home language	
<i>Stage 1:</i> Beginning Grade 1	Grows aware of sound/symbol relationships; focuses on printed symbols; attempts to break code of print; uses decoding to figure out words; builds skills for automatic decoding
<i>Stage 2:</i> End of Grade 1 to end of Grade 3	Develops fluency in reading; recognizes patterns in words; checks for meaning and sense; knows a stock of sight words
LATER SCHOOL EXPERIENCES: Continued use of home language and transition to English	
<i>Stage 3:</i> Grades 4 to 8	Uses reading as a tool for learning; applies reading strategies; expands reading vocabulary; comprehends from a singular point of view; evaluates what is read from the reader's one single viewpoint.
<i>Stage 4:</i> Secondary and early higher education	Analyzes what is read; reacts critically to texts; deals with layers of facts and concepts; comprehends from multiple points of view; can analyze text from multiple viewpoints
<i>Stage 5:</i> Late higher education and graduate school	Develops a well-rounded view of the world through reading; brings a broad worldview to comprehension task

CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

Educators in the developing world face daunting challenges as they try to implement First Principles for successful early reading programs. Several basic strategies can be used to address—and overcome—these challenges. Some common challenges and strategies to address them are provided below.

1. Language Diversity

Early reading programs must be designed in ways that are sensitive to the multiple languages spoken locally and then transition to official languages of the nation.

Strategy 1: Written texts drawn from children's everyday language experiences can help them to transition from local spoken language(s) to the official language of a country. Ask children to tell their stories. Record them in the home language. Help children to read them. Use these stories to bridge reading from the home language to the official written language.

Strategy 2: Shared reading is an engaging way to expand young children's reading. Provide many shared reading experiences with books so that children become very familiar with the language of those books.

2. Limited Resources

Early reading programs may lack very basic resources: adequate facilities; adequate supplies of instructional materials as basic as paper, pencils, and chalkboards; and high quality textbooks and other print materials. Teachers, school administrators, and other community members can overcome the lack of physical resources for reading instruction by marshalling local support in advocating for resources.

Strategy 1: Initiate an annual paper-and-pencil drive for donations at the local school. Solicit support from local businesses such as stores, gas stations, and health clinics.

Strategy 2: Create your own quality materials. Collect local oral stories to translate into written texts for shared reading with young children. Turn some stories into big books for shared reading and beginning reading instruction.

Strategy 3: In areas with somewhat high population density, mobile libraries in bicycle carts or other modes of transportation can serve multiple communities.

3. Large Class Size

Professional development can provide teachers with skills to manage large class sizes, and schools can learn to use human resources creatively. Such efforts should be an integral part of program planning. In the long term, vigorous and persistent campaigns to achieve smaller class sizes need to be undertaken locally.

Strategy 1: Train older students as teaching assistants to support younger readers and to serve as peer-facilitators in small-group reading activities.

Strategy 2: Seek community volunteers to regularly assist in classroom reading activities.

Strategy 3: Use technology to facilitate small-group or individualized instruction.

4. Health and Safety

A child who is not fed or lives in a state of physical threat cannot be expected to learn well. However, these conditions are reality for many children in developing countries. Early reading programs should strive to provide a safe haven and feed scheme for young learners through local support.

Strategy 1: Combine community engagement efforts with early grade reading program goals that put children first by keeping schools safe and ensuring a steady supply of food for a daily nutritious meal.

5. Equity

Early reading programs need to work toward the expansion of equity and access to schooling, particularly for girls.

Strategy 1: Join with community engagement efforts to prioritize education and act on that priority by expanding access to schools for all children. Community mobilization through public service announcements can emphasize the importance of all children enrolling and attending school and the importance of families supporting them in their learning by giving them time for homework and extracurricular reading activities.

Strategy 2: Ensure that reading materials will be interesting to and engaging for girls as well as boys.

6. Special Needs Learners

Attempts to include children who have physical and learning disabilities should be a priority goal of early reading programs. The program plan should demonstrate steps taken for inclusion and for meeting the needs of these learners.

Strategy 1: Help teachers understand and provide accommodations that assist children with special needs in the school and classroom settings; these include easy access to entryways and maneuverability in the classroom space. Teachers should also accommodate those with visual or hearing impairments by encouraging them to sit close to the front of the classroom.

Strategy 2: Use small-group supplemental instruction to meet the learning needs of children who need more time and practice to learn essential reading skills.

7. Teacher Education

Pre-service teacher training in early reading instruction and ongoing professional development for in-service teachers must be emphasized as early reading programs are planned and reviewed. Professional development should be stressed as an essential component, and reviewing opportunities for ongoing professional development should be emphasized as an integral part of planning initiatives and program implementation.

Strategy 1: Encourage teacher education programs to include specific training in methods for teaching early reading and for helping students make the transition to reading in English.

Strategy 2: Encourage teachers to read and discuss professional literature by providing books or journals in hard copy or electronically.

Strategy 3: Start a teacher book club that meets regularly to read and discuss professional texts on effective beginning reading instruction in multilingual settings.

Strategy 4: Collaborate with local and regional leaders of professional education organizations to plan and implement a professional development series on key



Credit: Cassandra Jessee/AIR

early reading topics that includes print materials, online or distance professional training (to the extent possible), and periodic peer-led workshops. These professional organizations could include reading teachers in the same locale and/or a combination of headteachers, resource persons, senior teachers, and novice teachers involved in teaching literacy. Ideally, this group would consist of roughly 5–10 people.⁸

8. Creating a Culture of Assessment Rather Than Examination

Examinations are a familiar and widely feared feature of school systems in most countries, but the idea of using continuous assessments to individualize instruction and guide teaching improvement is less familiar. In low- and mid-resource environments, continuous assessment can be conducted in a variety of ways that do not require large-scale, costly examinations.⁹

Strategy 1: Teachers can create wall charts that track increases in children's reading fluency rates (e.g., on a week-by-week basis or by the number of books/pages they have read).

Strategy 2: Teachers can develop self-assessment rubrics that allow students to evaluate their progress in reading and that raise their awareness and engagement.

8 Additional information about such communities can be found in the following document, *In My Classroom: A Guide to Reflective Practice* (DuPlessis, Habib, et al., 2002), which can be accessed at the following website: http://www.air.org/files/In_My_Classroom.pdf

9 For exemplary assessment guidance used in Malawi, see http://www.equip123.net/equip1/mesa/docs/CA_Practical_Guide_Teachers.pdf

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