USAID Read Liberia Program Impact Evaluation 2022
by NORC at the University of Chicago

Background
The goal of the USAID Read Liberia program was to improve early grade reading performance of students in six counties - Montserrado, Margibi, Bong, Grand Bassa, Nimba and Lofa - in Liberia. The program reached 640 public primary schools, 1,280 grade 1 and grade 2 teachers, and around 57,800 grade 1 and 2 students. To this end, Read Liberia supported teachers and principals with professional development and coaching, and provided early grade reading instructional materials including a reading book and an activity book for each student, teacher guides, and supplementary classroom materials.

Impact Evaluation
NORC at the University of Chicago conducted an impact evaluation of Read Liberia using a randomized control trial (RCT) where 90 schools were randomly assigned to treatment and control groups. We collected baseline data - reading assessments (EGRA) and sociodemographic characteristics - from a random sample of grade 2 students in these schools in May 2017, before Read Liberia started. We also collected data about the schools, principals, and grade 2 teachers. In 2019, NORC conducted a midline study to better understand the implementation of Read Liberia, and teacher practices in classrooms. In March/April 2021, NORC conducted endline data collection in the same schools visited at baseline. We collected the same data as at baseline from grade 3 students, principals, and teachers, along with information about Read Liberia implementation in the schools. In addition, we conducted 38 classroom observations of reading instruction in 2021 and 2022.

Findings

Chart 1: Read Liberia had a large positive effect on both oral reading fluency and comprehension

Correct words per minute

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Oral reading fluency</th>
<th>Oral reading comprehension</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baseline</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endline</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>17.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treatment</td>
<td>29.7*</td>
<td>34.4%*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baseline</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endline</td>
<td></td>
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*p<0.001. Baseline shows students at the end of grade 2; endline shows students at the beginning of grade 3.
Read Liberia has benefited students at all reading skills levels

- Reduced the number of students that were not able to read a single word in half (from 41% to 21%)
- Increased the reading ability of beginners and intermediate readers
- Increased the percentage of students reading 50 or more correct words per minute (from 7.5% to 23.4%)

Reading at home increased. At endline a significantly higher percentage of students in the treatment group than in the control group indicated having reading books, practicing reading, and being read to by someone at home.

Instructional reading practices did not improve. Classroom observations revealed very selective uptake of the Read Liberia program components. We found low levels of instructional quality, and a pedagogy that appeared not to have been impacted by Read Liberia training or materials.

Across treatment and control lessons, we observed similar very low levels of instructional quality in terms of language proficiency, reading proficiency, teacher knowledge and feedback to students.

Text Availability. The difference in the availability of text between treatment and control schools was stark. In all but one treatment class most learners had their own copy of the Let’s Read anthology, consisting of 50 leveled fiction and non-fiction texts and an additional 34 picture stories. Students could produce these even when they were not used in the lesson. They carried these readers to and from home and school and they looked well-used. In contrast, students in nine of the thirteen control classrooms had no reading text of their own, and relied on the blackboard, a teacher’s single reading text or handwritten text in their notebooks for reading in class. Read Liberia students also have an activity book and supplementary reading materials.

Conclusion

The positive impact of Read Liberia on reading performance is likely to lie in the exposure to large quantity and better-quality text (Let’s Read anthology) in class and/or the use of the text outside the classroom.

The Read Liberia evaluation suggests that high quality materials in the hands of children can make a difference, even when there is a lack of programmatic impact on instructional practice. Almost every learner in the Read Liberia program had sufficient reading materials of reasonable quality, packaged into an easy-to-manage, grade-level reading anthology that was used at home and in the classroom. Combining this resource with quality instructional practices at school holds the potential for much higher impacts than those already found in the Read Liberia program.