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EARLY GRADE READING ACHIEVEMENT AND CONTEXT IN THE DRC: FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This Technical Brief describes the challenges of access to education faced by Congolese early grade students. It covers the issues of the quality of education, the solutions implemented by the ACCELERE! project to help address the challenges identified, the lessons learned from the project, and the recommendations for future programming.

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THE CHALLENGE

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Africa's second largest country, is one of the lowest income countries in the world. Conflict and instability in several provinces place significant strain on the education system and create significant barriers to school access and retention, particularly for girls.¹ Instability, conflict, recurring Ebola epidemics, limited infrastructure, and low levels of educational access and outcomes contribute the DRC consistently being ranked at the bottom of the Human Development Index.² Out of more than 70 million inhabitants, 15 million are of primary school age, of whom 3.5 million are out of school.³

For those in primary school, learning levels are extremely low: A 2013 assessment of children's reading skills found that 68 percent of grade 3 and 4 students were unable to read a single word of simple text.⁴ The education system faces significant challenges to improving equitable access, quality, and governance throughout the sector. Consequently, the DRC is off track to meet the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goal 4 to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. While progress has been made in increasing access and quality, it remains limited and is further weakened by inequities related to gender and geographic location, among others.



“... some of my friends don't have the same learning opportunities I have.”

Grade 1 students from Bukole Primary School, Kananga

ACCELERE!!

A!1 improves educational outcomes for girls and boys through improved teaching and learning in national languages (Kiswahili, Ciluba, Lingala) and French, reducing barriers to education, and increasing transparency of school governance structures.

The Government of the DRC (GDRC) through the Ministry of Education (MEPST) and as part of its efforts to reform the education sector, revised its education policy through the Reform Act (*Loi cadre*) of 2014 and launched an Education Sector Strategy (*Stratégie Sectorielle pour L'éducation et la Formation, SSEF*) for 2016-2025.

In support of the GDRC's effort to improve education access and quality, in 2015 USAID and UKAID launched a US\$133 million program named ACCELERE!! (A!1) to improve

learning outcomes for students in formal and accelerated learning programs. In preparation for A!1, a

¹ Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies. (2013). “Policy Dialogue Forum on Education and Peace in the Democratic Republic of Congo.” <https://inee.org/resources/policy-dialogue-forum-education-and-peace-democratic-republic-congo>

² Inequalities in Human Development in the 21st century, Congo, UNDP, p.1 http://hdr.undp.org/sites/all/themes/hdr_theme/country-notes/COD.pdf

³ 2 ISSP/UO and MEPSP (2013) Rapport de l'enquête nationale sur les enfants et adolescents en dehors de l'école. Kinshasa, UNICEF, UNESCO Institute of Statistics and DFID DRC <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000221460>

⁴ Accelerating Progress to 2015: Democratic Republic of the Congo, A Report Series to the UN Special Envoy for Global Education, April 2013 Working Paper, p. 6.

third-party evaluator conducted a baseline Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA).⁵ The assessment found that pre-reading and reading skills in three national languages (Kiswahili, Lingala, Ciluba) for Grade 3 students and in French for Grade 5 students⁶ had not changed much from the 2013 assessment and were not sufficient to enable them to read with comprehension at grade level. Even at Grade 5, students were only reading an average of 11 correct words per minute.⁷

IMPACT AND FINDINGS

The main goal of the A!I project is improved early grade reading outcomes through the development and distribution of teaching and learning materials and in-service teacher professional development in four national languages. A!I's approach to monitoring and evaluating outcomes and impact on student reading skills consisted of: 1) a baseline assessment conducted in 2015; 2) two large-scale formative evaluations to monitor and inform program implementation (and support annual reporting of USAID standard indicators), conducted in 2017 and 2018; and 3) an impact evaluation of students' reading skills, with endline data collected in 2019). In all cases, an EGRA was used to measure critical literacy skills.



“In the past, there was no training nor teaching and learning materials at all. Each teacher taught in their own way ... when Accelerate! started, our schools received reading and writing materials ... Every child now has their own take home workbook and access to a textbook at school! So now we can focus more on having the children actually practice reading and writing!”

Vincent Kapajika, Head Primary Inspector, Kananga

The 2018 monitoring EGRA was administered in three national languages and in French at *écoles primaires* (EP or primary schools), and *centres de rattrapage scolaire* (CRS or alternative learning program schools). To compare results across timepoints, the 2018 monitoring exercise utilized the same random sampling approach as the one used to gather data in 2015 and 2017. The instrument used was also comparable. The assessment found that students' and learners' reading levels are improving, with an overall upward performance trajectory noted from 2015 to 2018. Moreover, mean scores increased (and in some cases doubled) in both EP and CRS, a reflection of the decline in “zero scores,” or percentage of students scoring 0 on a given skill. All differences were statistically significant.⁸

⁵ A!I's multi-year EGRA plan informed annual reporting of USAID standard indicators, which are structured to report fluency levels in relation to national benchmarks, as well as to inform programmatic decisions. A 2019 external impact evaluation with use of counterfactuals will also be conducted. All EGRA assessments, whether for ongoing monitoring or external impact evaluation purposes, have been structured to be comparable (instruments and samples).

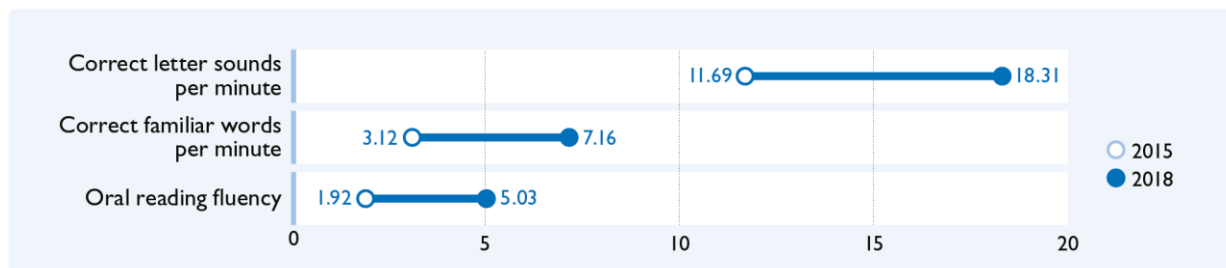
⁶ Grades 3 and 5 students were assessed as proxies to Grade 2 and Grade 4 students.

⁷ Education Evaluation Services in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC): The DRC 2015 Early Grade Reading Assessment, Early Grade Mathematics Assessment, and Snapshot of School Management Effectiveness—Report of Lessons Learned, Revised; [https://shared.rti.org/resources?country\[\]=34324](https://shared.rti.org/resources?country[]=34324), retrieved February 2020.

⁸ USAID / UKAID. (2018). “2018 Early Grade Reading Monitoring Assessment in the Democratic Republic of Congo.” https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00WFT6.pdf.

The 2018 monitoring EGRA results also indicated that students and learners performed best in Kiswahili-speaking provinces. However, though the upward trajectory is promising, oral reading fluency remains low, reducing children’s ability to comprehend. (See “Findings from Formative Evaluation” below for a description of the steps A! has taken to improve fluency and comprehension.)

FIGURE I. Reading fluency and comprehension in Kiswahili in 40 public primary schools



An analysis of the 2018 monitoring results identified the following contextual factors correlated with stronger student reading performance:

- Teacher attends at A! reading trainings
- Student reads at home
- Student speaks French at home
- Students learn in child-friendly classroom environment
- Student speaks national language at home (Kiswahili provinces)
- School receives kit (Kiswahili provinces)

An additional noteworthy finding from the 2018 EGRA monitoring results is that students’ and learners’ scores on the vocabulary sub-tasks declined in national languages and French. This suggests that the quality of or time spent on oral language instruction may need improvement. Although students’ and learners’ performance in other skills generally improved from 2015 to 2018, vocabulary scores for the national languages and French declined in both public schools and accelerated learning programs. A!’s Sociolinguistic Mapping and Teacher Language Ability Study⁹ provides a possible explanation for the decline in scores on the vocabulary subtask in the Kiswahili and Lingala-speaking regions. Specifically, the study identified differences between the standard and local forms of Kiswahili. The standard form is the official language of instruction and used in the EGR materials. In addition, in areas where Lingala is the language of instruction, significant differences exist between languages spoken in rural and urban areas. In fact, a substantial percentage of students and teachers in rural parts of the Sud Ubangi province speak Ngbaka, a non-Bantu language with little similarity to Lingala. In Equateur Province, students speak and use Lokondo, which shares some similarities with Lingala but is still a distinct language.

This could indicate that children are learning oral and written language skills in a second language, whereas the A! program design is based on the national reading and writing program, which assumes that most children and teachers already fluently speak and understand the national languages assigned to their province. Given the critical role language comprehension and vocabulary plays in learning to read,

⁹ USAID. (2018). “Report on Operations Research for Accelere! I : Sociolinguistic Mapping and Teacher Language Ability.” https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00TRB3.pdf

this pattern also indicates that other EGRA scores could be higher if children were to learn in a language they speak and understand and had stronger vocabulary skills overall.¹⁰

FINDINGS FROM FORMATIVE EVALUATIONS AND RESEARCH

In addition to the two monitoring evaluations of reading outcomes conducted in 2017 and 2018, A!I conducted quarterly assessments of student skills,¹¹ monitored teachers' fidelity of implementation of the reading program, and conducted additional research about the learning context to inform and enhance program implementation.¹² Quarterly assessments measured the extent to which students targeted by the program learn critical skills from the reading curriculum each trimester. The fidelity of implementation observations provided data as to how teachers were using teachers' guides and tracked school directors' monthly support visits to teachers.



Early Grade Reading Assessment in Action, November 2018

This comprehensive package of student skills assessment and contextual research informed revision of the program's teaching and learning materials (TLMs) and modifications to teacher in-service training. Enhancements included:

- **Integration of evaluation and remediation** units in final versions of teacher guides to support “differentiated pedagogy” in order to better support students with reading difficulties throughout the year. Units now include mini tests with benchmark scores and simple remediation activities for teachers to use to support students that do not meet desired scores.
- **Reading and writing competencies** were introduced over a longer period of time in the lesson plans to allow students more time to better master key competencies such as decoding.
- **To improve student writing practice**, A!I revised the lesson plan to include simpler instructions and teacher modeling before pupil application.
- To increase the amount of time that students to practice reading, specific guidance was added to help teachers **appropriately lead and support individual, independent, and simultaneous student reading exercises**.

¹⁰ USAID / UKAID. (2018). “2018 Early Grade Reading Monitoring Assessment in the Democratic Republic of Congo” https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00WFT6.pdf, p.47

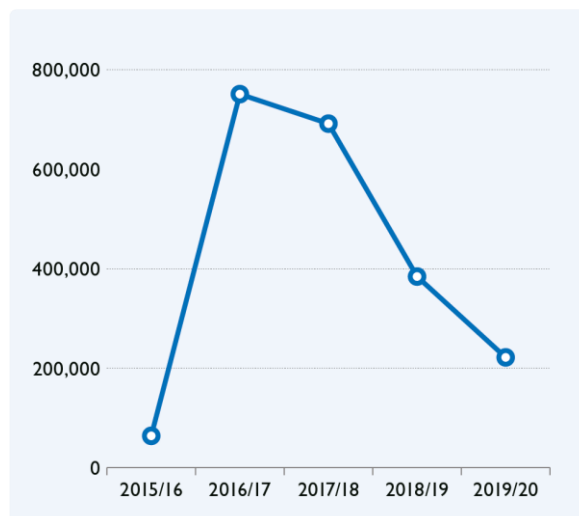
¹¹ A!I Quarterly Assessments (QA) provided a measure of student progress with a focus on the acquisition of critical reading knowledge and skills introduced during that school term. As such, the QAs were curriculum-based and grade-specific (in contrast to EGRAs, which are based on general reading skills across the early grades).

¹² Six research studies were conducted in total; two relevant to student reading outcomes are discussed in this brief.

- **Time for read aloud and vocabulary activities was increased** for students to learn differences between a standard national language and those spoken at home.

A!I assessments and research also yielded the following noteworthy recommendations for national language usage:

FIGURE 2. Number of students reached by the project



- To help teachers explain new words in the standard language that they may not be familiar with, A!I inserted an explanation of new words in the teacher guides.
- A!I developed a glossary of commonly used words for which the standard and locally used national languages differ
- In trainings in Kiswahili-speaking provinces, A!I included activities that explain language structure of standard Kiswahili.
- To address the significant difference in language between Lingala and rurally spoken Ngbaka, A!I added strategies to teacher’s guide so students can learn to transfer skills from one language to another.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR READING INTERVENTIONS IN THE DRC

There are a number of key take-aways and recommendations for continued EGR support to Congolese teachers and learners based on A!I’s rigorous evidence-base. The following section breaks these down by topic for the consideration of donors, the GDRC, and implementing partners, organized topically.

Policies and Standards

- **Address language policy issues and implications for instruction, training, and TLMs.** Continued efforts to improve early grade reading outcomes should include dialogue among stakeholders regarding language-related policies and practices and their effects on EGR. For example, where there are differences between formal and spoken languages, the government and relevant language and literacy specialists could collaborate to design or adapt existing materials to additional languages or dialects, as well as develop instructional strategies that teachers can use to support learners who may not be familiar with the assigned language. Identifying solutions to critical language-related issues will help to address gaps in students’ reading fluency and comprehension due to language mismatch.
- **Review and update existing literacy benchmarks and develop proficiency standards.¹³** GDRC and partners should convene key stakeholders to develop proficiency standards for reading

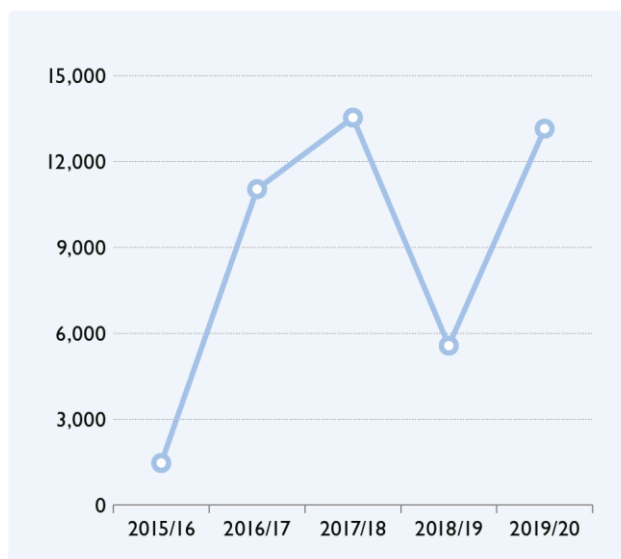
¹³ From October 16-19, 2017, A!I, with support from A!3, hosted a workshop in Kinshasa with the GDRC, leading national linguists, USAID, and other education partners to establish benchmarks for reading in Grades 2 and 4 for comprehension, oral reading fluency (ORF), letter-sound knowledge, and familiar word reading, for Grade 2 in Ciluba, Kiswahili, Lingala, and for Grade 4 in French. In addition, participants set improvement targets for Activity 1 in these skill areas and in zero scores for the project period (2015-2020).

and writing aligned with those recently developed by UNESCO, USAID, and a consortium of partners.¹⁴ To do so, the country will need to engage in policy linking, a process currently being piloted by USAID for setting context-specific, globally comparable benchmarks in reading and math.¹⁵

Teacher Instruction and Professional Development

- Provide teachers with more in-depth training in the standard version of national languages.** In light of students' poor performance on vocabulary tasks across languages, as well as teachers' reported difficulties teaching and understanding the standard version of the national languages, GDRC and partners should identify strategies to support teachers in their acquisition of the standard national languages, especially for the provinces assigned to Lingala and Kiswahili, by creating additional and/or different versions of materials.¹⁶

FIGURE 3. Number of teachers reached by the project



- Provide teachers with simple strategies and tools for conducting formative assessment.** Even though A!l TLMs have formative assessment units to guide teachers to assess students' reading progress, future interventions should design and implement simple and easy-to-use formative assessment tools and strategies that can be applied quarterly to help teachers monitor their students' progress and inform their instruction. Teachers also need more in-depth training on how to conduct effectively conduct formative assessment and use results.
- Support diverse opportunities for continuous professional development.** Teachers need multiple opportunities to continue to hone their skills and learn new ones. The GDRC and other stakeholders need to continue to identify cost-effective, sustainable, and scalable modalities for doing so. In-person "refresher" workshops and school-based peer-to-peer learning through communities of practice (*forum d'échanges*) should all be considered.

Teaching and Learning Materials

- Develop TLMs to support Kikongo language learners.** Future education interventions should include the development of TLMs in the fourth national language, Kikongo, which was not included in the A!l design. The development of a reading curriculum and TLMs in Kikongo would provide

¹⁴ Education Links, "Policy Linking Method: Linking Assessments to Global Standards." <https://www.edu-links.org/resources/policy-linking-method>. (Accessed March 12, 2020); Education Links, "Toolkit for Setting Internationally-linked Benchmarks in Early Grade Reading and Math." <https://www.edu-links.org/resources/toolkit-setting-internationally-linked-benchmarks-early-grade-reading-and-math>. (Accessed March 12, 2020); UNESCO (2019). "Global Proficiency Framework for Reading and Mathematics in Grades 2-6." <http://gaml.uis.unesco.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/05/GAML6-REF-16-GLOBAL-PROFICIENCY-FRAMEWORK.pdf>.

¹⁵ USAID. (2019). <https://www.usaid.gov/education/policy>.

¹⁶ As requested by GDRC and as a stop-gap measure, A!l provided teachers with dictionaries written in the standard national languages to provide official definitions and spellings.

learners in Congo Central Provinces with equitable access to the national curriculum in reading and writing and would support World Bank and GPE large interventions to improve reading outcomes.

- **Support the use of TLMs at scale.** GDRC should officially adopt a set of materials to be used by all donors. This would help to achieve economies of scale with respect to materials development and printing foster donor coordination and would reduce duplicative efforts. Standardizing TLMs will also encourage the establishment of a local publishing industry.

Community Support and Gender Equity

- **Mobilize communities to support reading improvement.** To support continued improvement in reading outcomes, parents and communities need to be engaged. Community-based summer reading camps established under A!I can support students during holiday breaks to prevent loss of reading gains during the school year, as well as provide remedial support to students in need. Future interventions should also continue to encourage parent and community involvement in reading activities outside of the classroom to strengthen students' reading habits.
- **Continue to tackle the persistent gender gap.** Even though progress was made in narrowing the gender gap (in the Ciluba Provinces, for example), 2018 EGRA results indicated that overall, boys are still performing better than girls on most subtasks.¹⁷ A!I conducted an internal gender assessment and found that girls are still at a disadvantage compared to boys due to existing social norms, including the expectation that girls perform household chores before homework. Future interventions should tackle these barriers through targeted social behavior change communication strategies.

Allow for adaption and flexibility of approach. Conditions in the DRC are complex. Challenges related to transportation, logistics, infrastructure, teacher mobility and turnover, and changes in funder priorities, policies (e.g., 2019 Trafficking in Persons Sanctions issues by the U.S. Government), and practices require implementing partners and the government to engage in continuous adaptive management to allow for flexible and timely adjustments.

Expand on monitoring, evaluation, research, and learning. More remains to be done if students in the DRC are to attain levels of reading fluency and comprehension that enable them to learn. It is essential to determine, through additional research, what additional targeted strategies should be applied to ensure improvement in fluency and comprehension skills of Congolese students. Possible areas of research include examining and triangulating student attendance with EGR results or determining what formal schools can learn from the higher performance of students attending Accelerated Learning Programs.

MOVING FORWARD

In conclusion, despite the many challenges encountered in implementing an early grade reading program in the DRC, A!I demonstrates that some gains can be achieved through large interventions, but more remains to be done. The above recommendations represent areas of intervention for funders, partners, and the GDRC to tackle immediately. This, in turn, will build on the momentum brought about by A!I to improve reading and writing skills for all Congolese students.

¹⁷ USAID / UKAID. (2018). "2018 Early Grade Reading Monitoring Assessment in the Democratic Republic of Congo." https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00WFT6.pdf, p. 20.