



EdData II: Education Data for Decision-Making

Brief on the State of Literacy in Sub-Saharan Africa

Introduction

Literacy is generally considered to be “the ability to decipher, use, and understand, some given code of knowledge or procedure, and then apply it to initiate levels of competence in many different fields of endeavor” (Easton, 2009). Although global literacy rates have been rising steadily over the past few decades, there is still a long way to go, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa. In Africa, 7 out of 10 children are likely to become semi-literate adults, meaning they will be unable to read or write with ease or fluency. In 18 African countries, more people are illiterate than literate (Ouane, 2009). Within this context, USAID requested that RTI review existing literacy data for primary grades in 20 sub-Saharan African countries and complete a report on the state of literacy. This brief reviews the various early grade reading assessments that RTI analyzed and provides key findings noted in the forthcoming State of Literacy report.

Assessing Literacy

Since 2000, donor agencies shifted from emphasizing improving access to education to improving educational quality and student achievement. Measuring literacy is an important predictor of student achievement (Gove and Wetterberg, 2011).

Currently, there are various tools that are used to determine reading fluency in the primary grades in the developing world. The Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) is one of the most widely administered literacy assessments in education. First used in Peru in 2006, EGRA has been used in more than 70 other countries and has been administered in more than 120 languages. Some examples of alternative assessments that are used primarily in Africa include Uwezo, Literacy Boost, the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ), the Analysis Programme of the Confemen Education Systems (PASEC)), as well as various national assessments. Table 1 presents an overview of alternative assessments.

Table 1. Overview of Alternative Assessments

	Uwezo	Literacy Boost	PASEC	SACMEQ
Type of assessment	Cross-national household survey that measures basic literacy and numeracy	Formative and summative assessment that was designed to evaluate Save the Children’s Literacy Boost program	School-based assessment that measures reading and math proficiency	School-based assessment that measures reading and math proficiency
Design	Rotating panel design	Stratified random sample	Stratified cluster sample	Stratified cluster sample
Grade/age administered	Children aged 6-16	Grades 1–4	Grades 2 and 5	Grade 6
Geographic coverage	Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya	South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa	Francophone African countries	Anglophone African countries

Table 1. Overview of Alternative Assessments

	Uwezo	Literacy Boost	PASEC	SACMEQ
Administered by	Hivos/Twaweza (a civil society organization)	Save the Children (an international nongovernmental organization)	National governments with the help of Confemen (La Conférence des Ministres de l'Éducation des pays ayant le français en partage)	National governments
Years administered	Annually since 2010	Not available	Annually since 1993, in one to three countries each year	1995, 2000, and 2007

Challenges with Drawing Comparisons Based on Assessments

Most reading assessments (including EGRA) are designed for individual administration in specific settings (e.g., classroom or household). Therefore, EGRA and the other aforementioned alternative assessments are not intended to be used to compare literacy outcomes across countries, languages, school systems, or even within a country (unless explicitly designed to do so; Gove and Wetterberg, 2011). In addition, it is also not possible to compare scores across assessments because the assessments may not even measure the same constructs due to differences in design and subtasks. For example, even though assessments with an oral reading fluency (ORF) subtask are intended to measure the same basic reading construct in all settings, scores will be affected by the length of the passage, the relative difficulty of the words in the passage, and the specific orthographies of the assessed language. It is noteworthy that although zero scores on ORF subtasks are still not directly compatible, they can at least provide a general sense about how students in a given country are performing.

Assessments that are created with the intention of comparability (e.g., the Programme for International Assessment [PISA]) are designed so that all cultural and linguistic biases are mitigated in the assessment by removing differentially functioning items from the test bank. Additionally, these assessments report standardized scores (by year) to create their league tables for rankings.

Overall, the assessments we examined for this study are not designed for comparability or report standardized scores (although SACMEQ has been created to be compared across assessed countries within each given administration).

The State of Literacy Report

For the State of Literacy report, we reviewed data from EGRAs and other reading assessments that have been completed in 20 countries in sub-Saharan Africa (Table 2). These 20 countries were selected because of USAID's presence and its commitment to continue working in these countries to improve educational opportunities.

- The forthcoming report and its corresponding tables provide an overview of every EGRA that has been conducted across the 20 countries;
- An overview of alternative assessments provided in those 20 countries; and
- Data from all EGRAs in the form of zero scores for ORF.

We identified 159 individual administrations of EGRAs across these 20 countries in the period 2005–2015. Nationally, representative EGRAs have been conducted in half of these 20 countries (with several other countries conducting internal national assessments). However, there is wide variation in the number and frequency of assessments by country. For example, Djibouti has not administered EGRAs in the past 10 years, but Ghana, Kenya, and Mali have all averaged more than one assessment per year.

Table 2 provides a listing of all early grade reading assessments conducted across the 20 selected sub-Saharan African countries since 2005. In the column labeled “country,” the number in parentheses represents the number of overall assessments done to date. Each year represents a single test administration; years that are separated by a slash signify multiple administrations within a given study or project. Table 2 reveals that there is a large amount of variation in the number and frequency of assessments by country.

Table 2. Assessments by Country, Year and Assessment Type

	Country	Uwezo	EGRA	Literacy Boost	PASEC	SACMEQ	National/ Other
1	Benin (3)	—	2015 ^a	—	2004–2005 2014	—	—
2	Democratic Republic of Congo (6)	—	2010/2012/2014 2011/2012 2013 2015 ^a	—	2010 2014	—	—
3	Djibouti (0)	—	—	—	—	—	—
4	Ethiopia (6)	—	2008 2009 2010 2012 2013 2014	—	—	—	—
5	Ghana (12)	—	2009 2011 2013 2014 2015 ^a	—	—	—	2005 2008 2009 (2) 2010 2011 2013
6	Ivory Coast (2)	—	—	—	2009 2014	—	—
7	Kenya (11)	2009 2011 2012	2009 2011 2012/2013 2013 2013/2014	2011	—	2007 2013	—
8	Liberia (6)	—	2008 2009 2008/2009/2010 2009/2010/2011 2011/2013/2015 2014	—	—	—	—
9	Malawi (5)	—	2009/2010 2010/2011/2012 2014 ^a	—	—	2007 2013	—

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Table 2. Assessments by Country, Year and Assessment Type

	Country	Uwezo	EGRA	Literacy Boost	PASEC	SACMEQ	National/ Other
10	Mali (12)	2012 2013	2007 2009 2009/2010/2011/2012 2009/2011/2013/2014 2010 (2) 2012 2015 ^a	2015 ^a	2011/2012	—	—
11	Mozambique (8)	—	2010 2011 2013 2013/2014/2015	2008 2009	—	2007 2013	—
12	Nigeria (7)	—	2010 (2) 2011 2011/2012/2014 2013 2014/2015	—	—	—	2010
13	Rwanda (6)	—	2011 2014 (2)	2013	—	—	2011 2014
14	Senegal (7)	2012	2007 2009 2010 2012/2013	—	2006/2007 2014	—	—
15	Somalia (2)	—	2013 (2)	—	—	—	—
16	South Africa (10)	—	2007 2009	2015 ^a	—	2007 2013	2011 2012 2013 (2) 2014
17	South Sudan (1)	—	2013	—	—	—	—
18	Tanzania (9)	2010 2011 2012	2012/2013/2014 2013 (2) 2014	—	—	2007 2013	—
19	Uganda (9)	2010 2011 2012	2009 2010/2012 2013 2014 ^a	—	—	2007 2013	—
20	Zambia (8)	—	2011 2012 2013 2014	—	—	2007 2013	2012 2013

^a Signifies that the assessment is still in progress or planning

Key Findings: What Do These Data Tell Us about Literacy? What Are the Next Steps?

Levels or basic reading proficiency are low in sub-Saharan Africa: Although results from individual assessments cannot be compared, the results all suggest that, in sub-Saharan Africa, there are great strides to be made in improving literacy for primary grade students. However, the EGRA results still suggest a very low level of basic reading proficiency at the Grade 2 or Grade 3 level. This finding is important because many students seem to lack the skills that will help them transition from using reading as a skill to learning other subjects. There are also wide variations across countries according to language and geographic area.

Variations in scores should be brought to the forefront of the policy discussion: Although it is clear from the data that more needs to be done to improve reading, it is difficult to discern what the data suggest in terms of specific policy, practice, and recommended approaches for moving forward. The wide variations in scores across languages and geographic areas suggest that intervention programs to improve literacy must be designed with specific contexts in mind. We suggest that variability should be brought to the forefront in the policy dialogue. Since various partners and governments started focusing heavily on early grade reading about 10 years ago, the important policy-awareness point that “most children can’t read any words even as late as Grade 2 or 3” is now widespread knowledge. While continuing to work on policy awareness at this level in countries where the low averages are not yet a matter of policy focus, at least in some countries (if not all) part of the policy dialogue needs to turn toward the variability issue.

More should be done to determine how assessments relate to each other: Although many different assessments are conducted in sub-Saharan Africa, little is known about how these assessments relate to each other. USAID, or other development partners, could require more concurrent validity and predictive validity analysis of mostly oral, or at very early primary level (e.g., Grade 2), assessments instead of near-end-of-cycle assessments such as SACMEQ and some national assessments. Developing an understanding, even in very approximate form, of the predictive or concurrent correlation between early grade assessments and the “certifying” examinations at the end of cycle (school by school, even if not child by child) might be illuminating and useful. Similarly, the options for developing group-administered assessments in the early grades, that touch upon orality and fluency but do not require one-on-one assessment, could profitably continue to be explored.

These assessments do not provide the level of disaggregation needed to extrapolate national representations of reading levels: Although nationally representative EGRAs have been conducted in half of the 20 countries covered in the State of Literacy report, these studies are still typically conducted only for one or two grades and do not always provide the regional or linguistic disaggregation that is needed to provide a true representation of national and subnational reading levels for early grades.

Literacy assessments can be supplemented to develop a deeper understanding of contextual issues: Although the State of Literacy report focused on direct student assessments, supplementing the literacy assessments with surveys that collect information about students, teachers, schools, and communities and about teacher practice, training, and support can be useful to developing a deeper understanding of contextual issues. The data from these supplemental surveys can help inform the development of successful interventions. However, it could also be argued that in some instances, (e.g., Mali) there are probably more assessments being conducted than are being used. Therefore, the call is not simply to conduct more assessments but to conduct more judicious and strategic assessments.

USAID’s EdData II project is led by RTI International.

The project’s Web site is www.eddataglobal.org.

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