

IMPROVING READING IN **THE EARLY GRADES**

Evidence from Haiti



Dr. TJ D'Agostino
Dr. Anasthasie Liberiste Osirus
Kate Schuenke Lucien



ABOUT US

The University of Notre Dame's ACE Haiti program promotes the flourishing of vulnerable children in Haiti through a transformative engagement with Catholic schools, families, churches, and communities.

We promote a holistic approach to child development and learning and are committed to finding scalable interventions capable of transforming life outcomes for children at risk. Our goal is to recognize, support, and strengthen institutional assets vital to children's healthy development, especially through school improvement, community engagement, and family supports.

We work throughout the country with various civil society partners, donors, and the Haitian government. We have a special relationship and long-term partnership with the national office for Catholic schools in Haiti, the Episcopal Commission for Catholic Education (CEEC), and Catholic Relief Services (CRS).

OUR WORK FOCUSES ON FOUR KEY AREAS:

- ***Early childhood development:*** promoting healthy development for children ages 0-5 by supporting parents and families and strengthening pre-school access and quality.
- ***Early-grade reading:*** improving students' reading outcomes as a foundation for academic and life success.
- ***Socio-emotional learning:*** fostering positive and nurturing relationships in and out of school so that children gain skills that promote academic success and healthy behaviors.
- ***L3 learning lab (Lakay, Legliz, Lekòl – Home, Church, School):*** focusing on three central institutions in Haitian children's lives, the L3 lab uses a system strengthening and learning approach to find solutions that cultivate resilient children, households, and schools.

A young boy with short hair, wearing a checkered shirt, is holding a book titled "Vloto". The background is a blurred outdoor setting. The entire image has a blue tint.

THERE IS A LEARNING CRISIS IN POOR COUNTRIES.

Efforts related to the Millennium Development Goals' helped increase access to primary education globally. As a result, the number of school-aged children not enrolled in primary school was reduced by half between 2000 and 2015 (United Nations, 2013). Children are going to school but not learning well and it is learning that matters for life and social outcomes (Gove & Cvelich, 2010; Pritchett, 2013; Hanushek & Woessmann, 2008).

Basic skills, particularly reading, foster an improved quality of life for students, families, and communities. Learning to read in the early grades is essential for later success and persistence in school and beyond.

Imagine a setting... in Haiti where half of students, after attending school for two full years, are unable to read a single word in Creole (Ball, Paris, & Govinda, 2014; Nielsen, 2014; RTI International, 2012). How do we address this learning crisis facing children in contexts like Haiti?

The University of Notre Dame's ACE Haiti program, working with Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and the Haitian Catholic school system, has led the most successful literacy intervention in Haiti to date. The project focused on delivering a quality curriculum with ample supports to ensure effective implementation, yielding highly promising results. What is most unique about ACE Haiti's approach is its commitment to continuous improvement through applied research, where the program functions as a "think and do tank," developing and testing promising practices to improve children's learning and life outcomes.

This brief will seek to answer the question "*What works to improve reading in low-income contexts?*" It provides a summary of cross-national evidence, shares findings and key lessons from a recent successful intervention in Haiti, and points to areas in need of greater attention.



EARLY GRADE READING AT A GLANCE

387 MILLION

Number of primary school-age children unable to read proficiently; 213 are already in school (UNESCO, 2017)

171 MILLION

Number of people who could be lifted out of poverty if all students in low-income countries left school with basic reading skills, reducing extreme poverty by 12% (UNESCO, 2011)

READING IMPROVES

physical and mental health, empathy, vocabulary, school attainment, civic outcomes, and income

READING REDUCES

stress, risk behaviors, unemployment, and risk of incarceration

HEALTH

A child of a mother who can read is 50 percent more likely to survive beyond age 5

49%

The proportion of Haitian students who cannot read one word by the third grade

20%

The proportion of Haitian teachers trained in literacy instruction

5 KEY ELEMENTS OF SUCCESSFUL LITERARY PROGRAMS

The “5Ts”: Teaching, Time, Texts, Tongue, and Tests (Kim et al., 2016).

1. **Teaching:** Teachers need to be trained and coached on the job. Effective training provides supplemental material and follow-up visits, and responds to specific school constraints. Teacher guides incorporate best practices, such as formative assessments, active learning, and a “model, coach, fade” approach.
2. **Time:** Adequate instructional time is necessary for learning. Reading instruction often does not receive sufficient time in poor countries. Daily reading instruction of 60 minutes or more is recommended.
3. **Texts:** Students need texts in appropriate languages and at their reading levels. Access to texts and opportunities to practice are critical for developing students’ automaticity, vocabulary development, and reading comprehension.
4. **Tongue:** Children should learn to read in the language they speak at home. Adequate access to texts in students’ mother tongue is a key issue and challenge in many contexts.
5. **Test:** Assessments to benchmark learning in class and evaluate projects are important tools for effective literacy interventions. Assessments in widespread use include EGRA (https://earlygradereadingbarometer.org/pages/about_egra) and ASER (<http://www.asercentre.org/>).





HOW WELL DO READING PROGRAMS WORK AND FOR WHICH SKILLS?

Reading programs that incorporate the 5Ts are supported by:

- strong evidence of improving emergent literacy skills,
- moderate evidence of improving reading fluency and being effective in multi-lingual contexts, and
- emerging evidence for improving listening comprehension, reading comprehension, and writing (Kim et al., 2016).

Emergent literacy skills are the building blocks of reading. These include the ability to recognize letters, their corresponding sounds, how letter sounds blend together to form other sounds and words, and the ability to decode or sound out written words.

Reading fluency is the ease and pace with which students read, often measured as words read per minute. When students need to sound out each word, they are not reading fluently and struggle to comprehend texts (Abadzi, 2006). Also, children in low- and middle-income countries must often learn to read in a language they do not speak at home, making second language acquisition a key concern in many contexts.

EVIDENCE GAPS?

There is currently only limited or emerging evidence about what works to improve listening comprehension, reading comprehension, and writing. Very few studies had a large impact on these skills (Kim et al., 2016), which are the ultimate goals for improved reading.

However, because programs using the 5Ts have been shown to be consistently effective in improving emergent literacy skills, reading fluency, and learning in multi-lingual contexts, such programs are regarded as among the most promising strategies for addressing the learning crisis in low-income settings.

LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

EARLY GRADE READING IN HAITI

From 2014 to 2016, The University of Notre Dame's ACE Haiti Program, the Haitian Episcopal Commission for Catholic Education, and CRS worked together to develop, implement, and evaluate the *Read to Learn* program.

This program equipped Haitian teachers with a scripted Creole-based literacy curriculum called ToTAL (translated directly as “All Children Reading” from Haitian Creole). ToTAL was developed by international NGOs, the Haitian government, and supported by USAID and incorporated a focus on the 5Ts (Teaching, Time, Texts, Tongue, and Tests).

1. **Texts:** The project provided textbooks, teachers' guides, and classroom libraries as well as supplemental materials.
2. **Tongue:** The program begins with phonics and reading instruction and the introduction of oral French in first grade, and transitions to reading instruction in both languages and continued French language instruction in second grade.
3. **Time:** The program required between 60-90 minutes of instruction per day to complete both the Creole and French lessons, a significant increase from the local norm of 30 minutes a day, three days a week.
4. **Teach:** Teachers received one-week of training each year and ongoing support in the form of bi-monthly classroom visits with instructional coaching.
5. **Test:** The project was evaluated using the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA).

The project also took extra steps to support effective implementation, where projects often break down in challenging contexts. In addition to the observation and instructional coaching visits, the project formed communities of practice at the school level for teachers to share and learn together. Teachers were encouraged to follow the basic elements of the program, completing a full Creole and a full French lesson each day. School



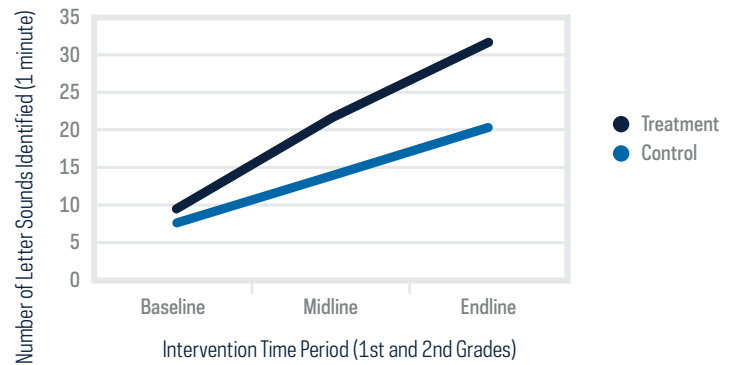
RESULTS FROM A 'GOLD-STANDARD' EXPERIMENTAL EVALUATION

Read to Learn was evaluated using a randomized evaluation over a two-year period with 47 Catholic schools in each of the treatment and control groups. Students were tested at the beginning of first grade, end of first grade, and end of second grade, assessing the effect of two years of participation in the program on students' literacy outcomes.

Students in participating schools showed accelerated learning in six out of eight literacy skills assessed compared to students in control schools that did not participate in the program.

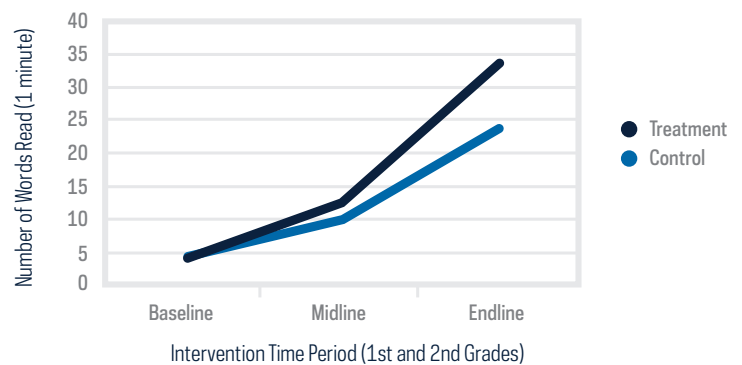
Knowledge of letter sounds (+143%)

The largest gains were seen in emergent literacy skills, particularly those related to letter sounds. Students' knowledge of letter sounds and ability to recognize the first letter in spoken words both improved far more than students not participating in the program. Each had an effect size of .79 standard deviations, which is considered large for an education program. Meaningful gains were also seen in participating students' ability to correctly identify letters in the alphabet, with a moderate effect size of .35.



Familiar word reading (+49%)

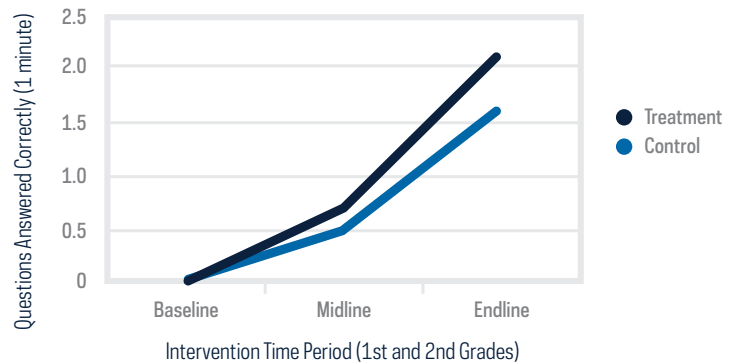
There is evidence that the program also improved students' reading fluency and ability to sound out words. Assessments of participating students' oral reading fluency showed moderate gains over the control group, with effect sizes of .34 and .35. A test of students' ability to sound out words had an effect size of .32.



Reading comprehension

However, while there were signs of improvement in Creole reading comprehension, and Creole and French listening comprehension, these gains were not large enough to be statistically significant (French listening comprehension effect size = .23, Creole listening comprehension effect size = .14, and Creole reading comprehension effect size = 0.20).

However, the preliminary results of a more recent implementation by the University of Notre Dame and their partners from 2017 to 2020, and another randomized evaluation of the program has shown statistically significant improvements in both Creole and French listening and reading comprehension. Given how rarely this is achieved cross-nationally and the fragility of the Haitian context, these results are particularly promising.



These studies represent the strongest research designs and most positive results achieved to date in Haiti. They offer solid justification for a broader replication of this approach in more Haitian schools.

These findings are important in that they add to a growing body of evidence that scripted literacy programs that focus on the 5Ts are effective at improving student reading skills. The findings are consistent with other studies in finding that *Read to Learn* was most effective in improving emergent literacy skills and reading fluency, and that improvements in reading and listening comprehension are possible but more difficult to achieve.

KEY LESSONS

- Work with effective and trusted local partners like the Catholic Church
- Focus on implementation effectiveness and support systems
- “Script the critical moves” (Heath & Heath, 2011) to maximize impact in challenging settings



THE WAY FORWARD

While the evidence from literacy programs in Haiti and other countries is promising, a key question remains: Why are programs often failing to improve students' reading and listening comprehension and what might be done to reach this goal?

Text- and Language-Rich Environments and Better Use of Formative Assessments

One priority must be to increase students' access to and use of quality texts in the appropriate language and at the appropriate reading levels through proven approaches like “dialogic reading” (Wasik & Hindman, 2015). “Children need to hear words, sentences, and stories frequently and need to engage in meaningful, rich language experience to develop their oral language skills” (Kim et al., 2016, p. 25). They also need ample opportunities to practice reading to build fluency, content knowledge, and vocabulary, which are building blocks of reading comprehension (Kim et al., 2016). Finally, teachers must be able to use texts effectively with more differentiated and child-centered pedagogy, requiring adequate training in skills like assessing students' reading level and selecting appropriate texts.

This requires better use of formative or benchmarking assessments in schools and classrooms. Few practices are as impactful cross-nationally as using tests and data to help children learn at the right level (Banerjee et al., 2016). To facilitate teachers' differentiation and use of leveled texts in classroom libraries, we developed a simple, rapid 1-1 assessment called ALiK (Ayiti Li en Kreyol – Haiti Reads in Kreyol). It is based upon ASER, (Annual Status of Education Report, <http://www.asercentre.org>), a tool developed by PRATHAM in India and used in countries around the world, but includes additional components focused on reading comprehension and vocabulary.





Investments in Early Childhood, Preschool, and the Home

“The foundational skills of literacy acquisition start developing first in the home and in the community” (Kim et al., 2016, p. 9). This suggests benefits of intervening before first grade. There is promising evidence for interventions focused on parenting, preschool, and home-literacy environments.

Home literacy environments

Vocabulary development happens at an early age, and babies and toddlers need to be read to and spoken with to develop their vocabulary and knowledge of the world. These are the building blocks of reading comprehension. Interventions to address home literacy environments in low- and middle-income countries have shown promise (Cao et al., 2015).

Parenting Programs

The first 1,000 days of life are the critical time for the development of children’s brains (Center on the Developing Child, 2007). Healthy development in early childhood depends on responsive and nurturing caregiving, safe and supportive physical environments, and adequate nutrition (Chan, 2013). There is strong evidence that parenting support – especially those that include both parents and children – can improve children’s development and readiness for school (Engle et al., 2011).

Preschool Access and Quality

Preschool education is another strategic place to focus. Research suggest that the earlier we intervene in schooling, the bigger the impact on students’ life outcomes (Heckman, 2008). Efforts to improve access to preschools and interventions aimed at improving the quality of pre-schools consistently led to improved cognitive outcomes for children (Engle et al., 2011).

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