

TRAINING TEACHERS TO **IMPROVE LITERACY EDUCATION**

Experiences from Haiti



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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.



QUALITY INSTRUCTION IS AT THE HEART OF IMPROVING **LEARNING OUTCOMES IN POOR COUNTRIES.**

This means understanding the needs, challenges, and opportunities to support teachers and quality teaching. We share lessons on training and support of teachers related to our work in Haiti implementing an early-grade literacy program in 350 schools and supporting teachers to improve instructional quality in their classrooms.

Imagine a setting... in Haiti where teachers are not paid a living wage, are poorly trained and supported, and work in extremely challenging conditions teaching classes of well over 40 students, most of whom are living in extreme poverty and have an array of learning needs.

The University of Notre Dame's ACE Haiti program, working with 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 teachers to ensure effective implementation, yielding highly promising results. What is most interesting about our approach to teacher professional development is the multiple forms of support for teachers to strengthen their instruction over time.

This brief answers the question *"How do you effectively train teachers for improved literacy outcomes in low-resource settings?"* It provides a summary of findings and key lessons from a recent successful intervention in Haiti and points to areas in need of greater attention.

TEACHERS IN HAITI AT A GLANCE

20% *of Haitian teachers are trained in literacy instruction*

25% *of teachers receive an education beyond eighth grade (IDB, 2007)*

OVER 50% *of teachers could not complete basic tasks in reading and math (Sabmi, 1998)*

33% *of teachers are trained, but mostly in two-year “Ecole Normal” schools of questionable quality (Wolff, 2008)*

TEACHERS *are not paid a living wage, are not paid consistently, and do not enjoy a high status in society*

CLASSES *often lack: student books, instructional materials, enough furniture, adequate lighting, ventilation, protection from weather, sound barriers, and enough space for large classes (avg. ~45 p/class)*

STUDENTS *face hunger, chronic absenteeism, inadequate access to health care, and excessively long commutes*

As such, the need for better teacher training was the most frequently cited need in interviews of Haitian Catholic educational leaders (ACE Consulting Interviews 2012).

MULTIPLE FORMS OF SUPPORT TO IMPROVE INSTRUCTION

“One-off” professional development is known to be ineffective at improving instructional practice and changing teacher behaviors in the classroom, while ongoing, job-embedded professional development is effective at changing teacher practice and improving student outcomes (Bean, 2014; Kaft, Blazar & Hogan, 2018). Given the needs of teachers and the challenges they face in the Haitian context, we included various forms of job-embedded, ongoing professional development for teachers to provide multiple levels of support. These included:

1. **Highly elaborated curriculum guides:** The guides model and support effective instruction.
2. **Annual summer training:** 1 week annually of training each summer on the basics of the program and effective literacy instruction.
3. **Ongoing job-embedded, professional development:** Monthly instructional coaching from regional experts.
4. **Supplementary trainings:** 3-4 days of mid-year, supplemental training on targeted skills.
5. **Cluster meetings (i.e. Professional Learning Communities):** Monthly meetings of teachers and school directors from nearby schools led by regional instructional coaches.



HIGHLY ELABORATED CURRICULUM GUIDES:

Given the low educational levels of teachers, the University of Notre Dame's work through ACE Haiti is aimed to provide scaffolded supports for teachers to improve their instruction. The first support is the use of "highly elaborated" or "scripted" teacher guides. The guides incorporate high-yield instructional practices like a gradual release of responsibility ("I Do, We Do, You Do"), ample checks for understanding, an active pedagogy, and a spiraled design with frequent opportunities to review and master content.

ANNUAL SUMMER TRAINING:

Teachers are trained for one week each summer in a residential training organized by supervisors and supported by the project partners. Training focuses on practical applied practice, including the following topics:

- Methodology of teaching using the scripted curriculum
- Preparing lessons
- Classroom management
- Teaching reading
- Positive discipline and alternatives to corporeal punishment
- Assessing students' language skills
- Assessing students' reading skills
- Reading comprehension and use of classroom libraries

The project also includes training for school directors, with the aim of increasing school-level support for the goals of the program.

ONGOING JOB-EMBEDDED, PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT:

Teachers in participating schools also received ongoing support in the form of monthly classroom observations and instructional coaching visits from supervisors. Supervisors were local pedagogical experts employed at the regional level who each supported ten schools that implemented the program.

SUPPLEMENTARY TRAININGS:

The program also provided three or four days of annual “refresher training.” These trainings sought to train new teachers or those that were struggling with elements of the program, or provide additional training on specialized elements of the program. A significant focus of these trainings was on elements of the program that went “beyond the script.” These included a focus on the use of classroom libraries and key, unscripted, pedagogical practices, namely:

- The use of in-class benchmarking assessments and ability leveling;
- Remediation techniques for struggling learners;
- Conducting effective interactive read-alouds, including an emphasis on new vocabulary and reading comprehension questions;
- Using a word wall; and
- Selecting leveled texts for independent student reading practice.

CLUSTER MEETINGS:

Similar themes were introduced, reviewed, or extended through a set of monthly “cluster meetings.” These function as ‘professional learning community’ meetings among groups of schools located near to one another. Regional pedagogical coaches facilitate the meetings, which include participating teachers and school directors. In these meetings they discuss lessons learned, share successes and challenges, and provide informal training in targeted areas of practice.



GLOBAL LESSONS ON COACHING

A “hard” or directive approach to coaching focuses on helping less experienced teachers adopt a new practice; for example, to implement a new, structured program with fidelity of implementation. A “soft” or reflective approach to coaching aims to engage teachers in reflective inquiry about their practices. Some have advocated for considering a balanced approach focused on both implementation fidelity and teacher reflection on their practice and adapting the focus of coaching over time (Bean, 2014; Ippolito, 2010).

KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS ESSENTIAL FOR EFFECTIVE COACHING

- Knowledge of literacy and language development, as well as knowledge of instruction and assessment
- Experience teaching effectively at the same grade level they are coaching
- Experience working with teachers or providing professional development
- Understanding of the coaching process (e.g., how to observe, model, discuss with teachers)
- Understanding of adult learning
- Strong interpersonal, leadership and communication skills
- Ability to develop a trusting relationship with teachers and to work well with them
- Disposition suited for coaching (e.g. approachable, understanding of coach role) (Bean, 2014; International Reading Association, 2004; 2010; L’Allier et al., 2010).

COACH ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

- Observe teacher’s lesson delivery
- Co-plan and/or co-teach a lesson
- Model instructional practices
- Demonstrate how to use or make instructional materials
- Assess students’ literacy skills, or help teachers to do so and identify how results can inform instruction
- Discuss challenges or problems and identifying potential solutions
- Train teachers and provide professional development opportunities, either in a formal workshop setting or in small groups (Adapted from Pfllepsen, 2018).

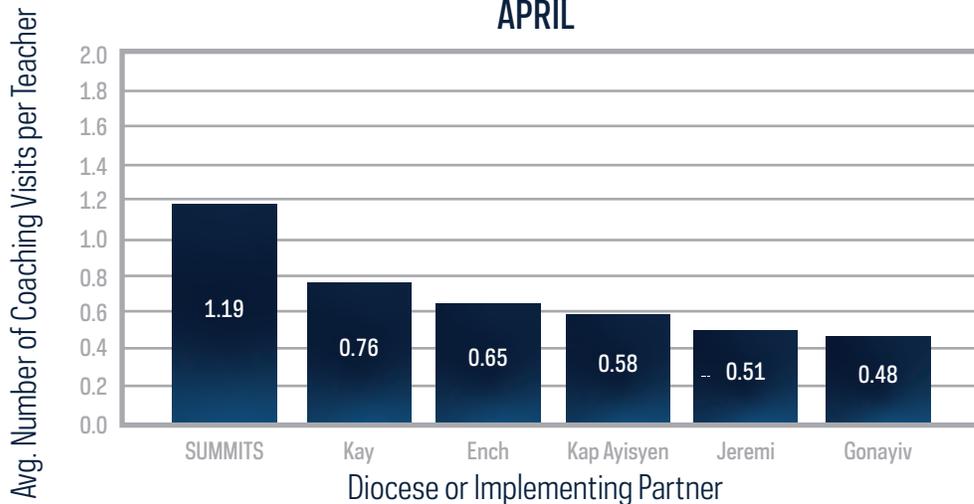
LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

1. COACHING VISITS ARE AN EFFECTIVE MEANS OF SUPPORT AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE PROJECT, THOUGH THE FREQUENCY OF VISITS WAS A CHALLENGE.

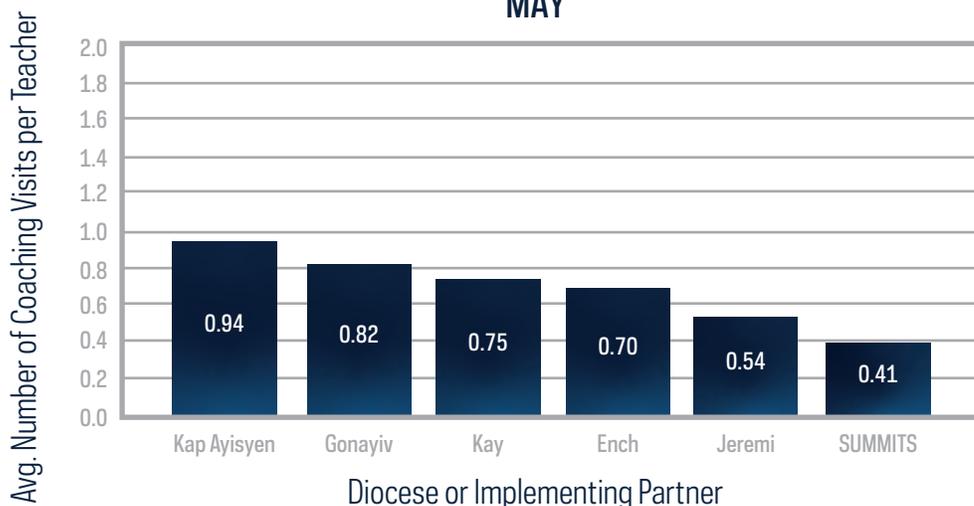
Overall, coaching visits are regarded as an important means of supporting program implementation and instructional improvements. The project had set a target of two coaching visits per teacher per month; however, (as seen in the average number of visits received by teachers by region in April and May 2019 in the charts below) this was not achieved for the vast majority of teachers across the 350 schools in the project. Through the first year (2017-18), teachers received an average of about one visit per month. But in the second year (2018-19), especially due to political protests that disrupted life in Haiti in the spring, the rate of coaching visits fell to roughly .7 visits per month.

AVERAGE NUMBER OF COACHING VISITS

APRIL

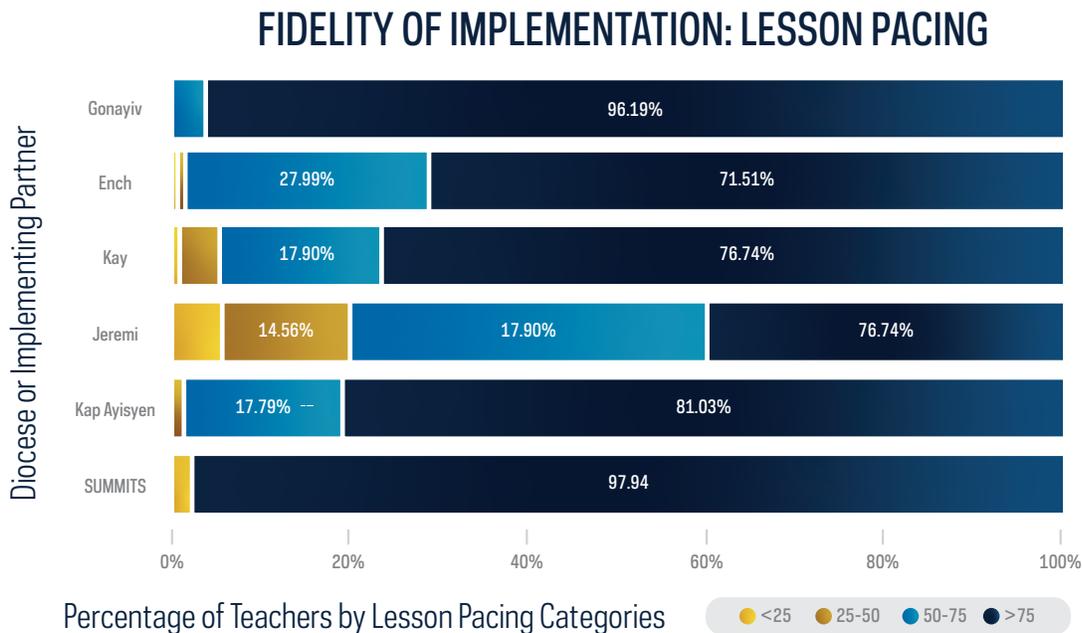


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2. INSTRUCTIONAL COACHES AND CLUSTER MEETINGS FOCUSED ON LESSON COMPLETION HELP ENSURE TEACHERS STAY ON PACE WITH THE CURRICULUM SCOPE AND SEQUENCE IN MOST REGIONS.

In light of the political challenges in the context, this is a noteworthy success. It is indicative of both the multiple levels of support for teachers, as well as how much teachers and communities valued the program.



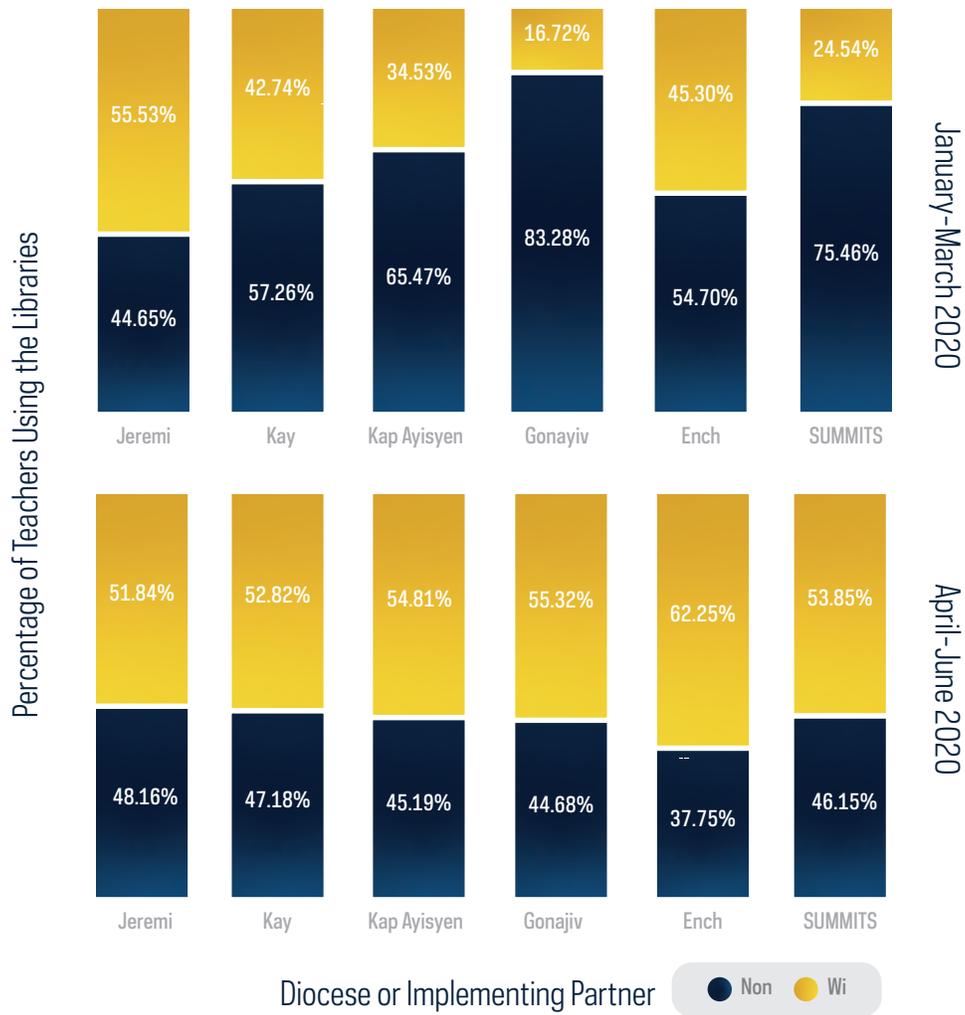
The color coding is based on how well teachers are doing with sticking to a pacing calendar. Navy blue suggests they are between 75% and 100% up to date on their lessons. Light blue, that they have completed between 50-75% of planned lessons. Gold, between 25-50%, and yellow, less than 25%. Note that in all but one region, lesson pacing was overwhelmingly strong (navy blue) or adequate (light blue), suggesting high fidelity of implementation and adequate lesson pacing throughout most schools.

3. THE PROJECT EXPERIENCED MAJOR IMPROVEMENTS IN USE OF CLASSROOM LIBRARIES DURING THE SECOND YEAR, WHICH HAD BEEN A MAJOR CHALLENGE.

Students need ample exposure to texts at an appropriate reading level, both to be read aloud to them and for them to practice early reading skills. This is necessary to build their vocabulary, reading fluency, and reading comprehension. However, this requires a wide array of children’s books in classrooms, preferably at a range of reading levels, and for teachers to be skilled in delivering interactive read-alouds, weaving in vocabulary instruction, and engaging students in meaningful discussion about texts to facilitate comprehension. It also requires them to implement more student-centered methods in the classroom, such as testing students reading abilities and facilitating students to select books at their reading levels to practice reading independently. In other words, it requires teachers going well beyond the script and to be effective in delivering high-yield literacy instructional practices.

In the first year of the project, the major focus was on implementing the basic scripted curriculum. A train-the-trainer model was used to introduce the use of classroom libraries halfway through year one. Fridays were to be used as a special reading day when teachers would be encouraged to use the libraries rather than the scripted program. Effective implementation and uptake in the use of the classroom libraries lagged in year one. For year two, a half-day training was incorporated into the summer training; however, this also was inadequate to help change teacher behavior and foster the adaptation of new instructional practices.

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We identified the following challenges:

- Inadequate training time
- Inadequate focus and support from the instructional coaches
- Weakness of the train-the-trainer approach (too much diffusion in the message and methods)
- Too many and too complex instructional expectations (i.e. the use of word walls for various vocabulary and writing practices, the use of interactive games)

In the second half of year two (2018-19), the following changes were made regarding training and support for the use of classroom libraries:

- Instruction surrounding the use of classroom libraries was the focus of the 3-4 days of supplemental training;
- Specialists delivered residential training to teachers directly rather than using a train the trainer model;
- Supervisors encouraged teachers to use the libraries each Friday and supported teachers in these efforts;
- Expectations for what teachers should be doing with the libraries were scaled-back, and focused primarily on using the books for interactive read-alouds. Teachers were also encouraged to use the libraries for independent student practice, but this child-centered method was a challenge for many teachers and not yet occurring consistently in most classrooms.

The charts above show the progress made from early in the spring semester (January to March 2019) to late in the spring semester (April to June) in terms of the consistent use of classroom libraries. One notes a large increase in utilization (blue-green) in all project regions.



THE WAY FORWARD

While the progress in teachers' skills and instructional abilities across the projects is promising and student learning outcome are consistently improving at scale, a number of areas need continued attention and are the focus of ongoing exploration and refinement. Issues of primary importance include: 1) teacher motivation, 2) reading comprehension and fluency, and 3) teachers' content knowledge gaps, 4) Sustainability, and 5) continued research.

CHALLENGES

1. **Teacher motivation:** Teachers and school communities both deeply value the program, but they also express concern over the increased workload and the lack of compensation.
2. **Reading comprehension and fluency:** Aggregate evidence from observation forms suggest that 24 percent of teachers were reported to have had difficulty with reading comprehension lessons, and 13 percent with fluency lessons. These accounted for 62 percent and 35 percent respectively – or 97 percent of all – of the observed incidents of teachers struggling with lessons. These reports need to be better understood and adjustments made to lessons, training, or coaching to adequately support teachers in these important skill areas.
3. **Teachers with content knowledge gaps:** A small proportion of teachers in the program are reported to struggle with their own reading fluency or French language proficiency, impeding their ability to be effective instructors in these areas. Means of providing remedial support to teachers with low language proficiency and literacy skills must be considered.
4. **Sustainability:** A major challenge will be sustainability of coaching. The instructional coaches for the literacy projects in Haiti are provided by civil society organizations like the Catholic Church. Salaries for these personnel are paid by grant funding, posing a threat to sustainability when grants end. How can schools ensure sustainable mechanisms of support for teachers that are not dependent on outside funding?
5. **Continued research:** On the most effective means of fostering teacher support in early-grade reading programs in low-income country contexts. For example, Pfeypsen (2018) points to the following research questions related to the topic of instructional coaching. Similar questions should be pursued regarding teacher training and professional learning communities.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What coaching characteristics, qualifications, and behaviors result in high-quality, effective coaching and lead to changes in teachers' practices and student outcomes?
- What does quality coaching look like? What indicators can be used to measure quality?
- What is the nature of the interaction between coaches and teachers? What aspects of the coach-teacher relationship lead to better coaching outcomes? How can positive coach-teacher relationships be fostered?
- What are teachers' experiences and attitudes regarding coaching? What do they find more—or less—helpful in terms of coaching activities?
- How do coaches' activities, skills and the quality of their coaching change over time? At what point do coaches become “effective”?
- What is the relative impact of different coaching approaches to early-grade reading and activities in low- and middle-income country contexts in improving teacher instruction and student outcomes? (Adapted from Pflepsen, 2018).

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