



Enabling Quality Instruction, Empowering Effective Early Reading Acquisition: Lessons Learned From a Three-Year Partnership with Burkina Faso, Niger and Senegal

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Overview: *This paper presents and discusses the development, implementation and preliminary results of an ambitious capacity-building project targeting the increase of children's literacy levels across three West African countries, coordinated by the International Bureau of Education (IBE-UNESCO) and sponsored by the Global Partnership for Education (GPE): 'Improving Learning Outcomes in Early Grade Reading: Integration of Curriculum, Teaching, Learning Materials, and Assessment' (Burkina Faso, Niger, Senegal; 2013-2016).*

In May 2015, the international community adopted a critically important agenda meant to guide global education development over the next 15 years. Encapsulated in Sustainable Development Goal 4, Education 2030 is shaped by an understanding of **literacy** as absolutely essential to advancing the larger UN Agenda 2030 for sustainable development (World Bank, 2015). Because gaps in reading acquisition dramatically impact learning abilities at large, reading difficulty must be viewed as much more than an individual challenge – it holds back the development of entire societies, by preventing citizens to fulfil their educational and civic potential. By focusing on literacy achievement, relevant learning outcomes and effective teacher preparation (SDG 4), the Incheon Declaration entrusts quality literacy education to become, by 2030, a primary catalyst of sustainable development across the board and the world.

In 2000, the international community pledged to reduce illiteracy rates by 50 per cent by 2015, but many countries appear to have missed that deadline (UNESCO Institute for Statistics). At least a quarter of the 250 million school-age children currently bound to reach adulthood without functional reading skills do not have access to education at all. It has become clear, however, that the global early reading education crisis extends far beyond issues of access. Today, about 115 million children who do make it into school are still expected to lack basic reading skills by grade 4, according to an alarming EFA Global Monitoring Report projection (UNESCO, 2014a).

Poor **quality of education** and of **curricula** appears to lie at the core of this tragedy. Research provides clear evidence of a correlation between learning outcomes and the quality of the education students receive (UNESCO, 2014b). Instructional effectiveness is ensured by high-standard teacher education (Moon, 2013) as much as by the quality of curriculum content and curricular alignment, which are perhaps the most important prerequisites to positive reading achievement levels. A curriculum is indeed much more than a program: it defines relevant and thoughtfully organized learning experiences matched with appropriate intended outcomes, and an evaluation system allowing to assess learning as well as teaching (Taylor, Raphael and Au, 2011). Experts such as Stabback, Malems and Georgescu (2011) identify two key characteristics of model curricula: they are

clearly documented; they are also explicit as to what, why, and how students should learn. These criteria are essential. They ensure coherence among the many elements involved, including textbooks, lessons, instructional techniques, assignments, and assessments.

However crucial, the above findings are still far from translating into policy and practice worldwide. African governments typically recognize quality early reading education as a crucial mean to achieve effective learning and later inclusion, but often are not capable of ensuring the kind of coherence advocated by researchers. Too many teachers lack the theoretical and practical knowledge required to develop strategies that effectively foster early reading acquisition. The challenge is made even more complex by Africa's vibrant multilingual reality and overall shortage of pre-primary education. Not only do children lack opportunities to develop critical foundational skills, they are also often not learning to read in their first language.

Burkina Faso, Niger and Senegal number among the countries in which pupils too often do not develop the literacy skills they need to thrive. Scores on national and international tests have shown that in Niger, 20% of students are functionally illiterate after five years in primary school (DESAS 2007). The percentage is 37% in Burkina Faso, 38% in Senegal (PASEC 2009). Such vertiginous gaps in reading acquisition make it nearly impossible for children to succeed academically and become engaged and productive citizens. Many of these 4th graders will drop out of school, grow up unable to read job announcements or participate in elections – the early literacy crisis ultimately affecting society at large. Acknowledging that fact, all three governments have placed a high priority on effectively teaching and nurturing reading and writing skills.

Since 2013, the International Bureau of Education (see [Highlight 1](#)) has supported their efforts through a large-scale capacity-building project specifically aiming to enable the development and implementation of a more effective reading curriculum: **'Improving Learning Outcomes in Early Grade Reading: Integration of Curriculum, Teaching, Learning Materials, and Assessment' (2013-2016)**.

Sponsored by the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), the project has enabled and paved the way to the elaboration and Implementation of national plans of action targeting the improvement of early reading education, in line with larger national curricular reforms (launched in 2008 in Senegal, in 2015 in Niger and Burkina Faso). The project was conceived as a service to be provided in two phases: a national and international diagnostic study would allow to formulate country-specific recommendations; curriculum development and capacity-building activities in each country would build on these orientations.

Phase 1: National and international diagnostic study

The diagnostic study (see [Highlight 2](#)) was conducted between October 2013 and December 2014. The IBE-coordinated international and local team of experts in charge had a two-fold mission:

- identify the latest research findings in the area of early reading education internationally, and

Highlight 1

An international centre of excellence in curriculum matters

Founded in 1925 in Geneva, the International Bureau of Education (IBE), as the UNESCO institute specializing in **curriculum development** and related matters, is a global Centre of Excellence (CoE) in Curriculum.

The institute is known for its relentless promotion of a shared understanding of curriculum issues (IBE-UNESCO 2015), and its leadership in three areas key to the future of education worldwide: **capacity development and technical assistance, knowledge production and management, policy dialogue**.

Within the framework of Education 2030 and the Sustainable Development Agenda, the IBE supports Member States in achieving equitable **quality education for all**.

Highlight 2

The diagnostic study in numbers

2 complementary analyses:

national curricula / international research on early reading education

Over **200 curricular documents** analyzed

36 classroom observations

110 interviews with teachers and school principals

A **220-page research report** in French, a 30-page summary in English

2 international meetings (1 to discuss the report's content and 1 to present its conclusions)

- analyse both the national reading curriculum and the classroom teaching practices within each country.

Ministries of Education officials, curriculum developers, supervisors, education researchers and school staff members in Burkina Faso, Niger and Senegal were meant to be the primary users and beneficiaries of the findings.

The results of this unprecedented study were released in a seminal 220-page research report (only available in French as of now), **'Teaching and learning of reading in a multilingual context: analyses, observations and recommendations for three sub-Saharan countries (Burkina Faso, Niger, Senegal)'** (IBE-UNESCO, forthcoming in English).

The first part of the report consists in a comparative study of the latest theoretical and practical insights in the area of early reading education internationally, with a focus on contexts of second-language reading instruction, in which language and reading acquisition are supposed to take place simultaneously.

The second part of the report entails a thorough analysis of existing curriculum documents and actual teaching practices in Burkina Faso,

Niger and Senegal. Experts assessed official guidelines, syllabi and textbooks for grades 1 to 3, paying specific attention to the prescriptiveness and detail characterizing curricular and pedagogical material as regards early reading instruction (see [Highlight 3](#)). They evaluated the alignment between official frameworks and learning materials, teacher training, assessment methods. Classroom observations were also conducted, along with focus group / individual interviews with teachers and school principals. This double focus (document analysis / observations and interviews) allowed for the strengths and weaknesses of each national reading curriculum to be highlighted in both their practical and theoretical aspects.

As a whole, the report identifies the elements required for successful early literacy acquisition, provides state-of-the-art knowledge on effective reading curricula and related curriculum issues, and formulates general as well as tailored **evidence-based recommendations**. Two lines of action are foregrounded:

- **Quality teacher education.** Experts recommend to invest in enabling educators to deliver quality early reading education through high-standard initial training and professional development. The urgency to adapt teacher education to the teaching cultures prevalent in the context of delivery as well as to the linguistic challenges to be faced by pupils is notably emphasized.
- **Quality curricular and teaching materials.** Experts call attention to the importance of developing and regularly updating high-standard curricular and teaching materials, as well as of ensuring that teaching practices are aligned with these materials.

Highlight 3

Assessment of national curricular frameworks and teaching materials: sample guiding questions

How is the **concept** of 'reading literacy' defined in curricular and teaching guidelines?

Do materials explicitly address and provide **guidelines** for early reading instruction and assessment?

Do materials integrate the **latest findings** as regards early literacy development and best reading education practices?

Are students' existing / evolving **capacities** and **language backgrounds** taken into account?

Are learning and teaching presented and structured in terms of **progression**?

Are curricular documents, resources, teacher education and teaching practices **aligned**?

During a special Regional Debate held in Dakar in October 2014, the report was presented to an audience composed of international and local experts in reading education, representatives from partner countries as well as from local and international organizations, including UNICEF and the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie, and other education system stakeholders. Serigne Mbaye Thiam, Senegal's Minister of Education, noted that the meeting represented "a crucial moment to reassess current practices and curricular tools and achieve qualitative changes". One common priority was identified, in line with the report's conclusions: the imperative to **empower teachers** to deliver effective early reading instruction. Following the Debate, Burkina Faso, Niger and Senegal developed national plans of action tailored to country-specific linguistic and educational contexts and needs (see [Highlight 4](#)). IBE-supported technical assistance and capacity-building activities would help develop and implement quality curricular documents aligning with the targets defined by each country.

Phase 2: Curriculum development and capacity-building for high-quality teaching

Three objectives have been defined for the second phase of the project, that started in January 2015:

- develop curricular solutions (elaborate tailored curricular documents),
- build national capacity for high-quality teaching (train teacher trainers to best use these new materials),
- pilot this use and assess its results.

The IBE held nine capacity-building workshops — three in each country — throughout 2015, proving instrumental in helping governments meet the first objective. These workshops indeed led to the production of highly important documents:

- In Senegal, national orientations on teaching reading and writing in French as a second language, and a supporting document for instruction addressed to teacher trainers.
- In Niger, two teacher-training modules, covering grades 1/2 and 3/4 of primary school, matched with a guide for practitioners.
- In Burkina Faso, a guide and toolkit for teachers, and a revised training module.

The IBE's contribution was equally decisive in preparing the organization of six workshops – two in each country to be held in 2016 – enabling teacher trainers to knowledgeably implement the above documents (see [Highlight 5](#)).

The first year of implementation has been a success; the second year is promising great results. The fact that, from 2016, primary school teachers will be equipped with essential, up-to-date knowledge about early reading teaching and acquisition is a major achievement of its own. In Burkina Faso, Niger, Senegal, prior to the project and the national curriculum reforms it supports, explicit teacher training in the area of reading education was not included in

Highlight 4

Language of instruction: partner countries' profiles

▶ In **Senegal**, French remains the official language of instruction; virtually no local languages are used in formal education. Several pilot bilingual experiments have recently been conducted, however, testifying to a growing governmental interest in bilingual education.

▶ In **Burkina Faso**, monolingual and bilingual formal education models coexist. Bilingual ones let children use their native African languages just long enough to develop the decoding and comprehension skills that will let them continue learning in French.

▶ **Niger** has a long history of multilingual reading and writing instruction. Niger's new education reform has consecrated this history through the validation a national multilingual curriculum.

Highlight 5

Targeting teacher training

▶ Across the three countries, almost **700 teacher trainers** will benefit from workshops where they will learn to translate reforms in curriculum and pedagogy into their own practice.

▶ In Niger alone, over **600 teachers** will be trained in February and March of 2016.

the curriculum. Teachers would typically enter the classroom unprepared to deliver quality early reading instruction. Through much-needed training material production and knowledge integration, the project has started to address this flagrant lack, and empower educators to become primary actors of change.

In each country this project has allowed teachers to develop a new understanding of what it means to teach and to learn to read. It has highlighted the interrelation of reading and writing, recognising the need to train teachers and teacher trainers specifically to teach to read and write. Just as importantly, there has been significant development in the awareness of the role of the national spoken language in supporting reading acquisition in a second language instruction, as well as the need for teaching approaches that focus on second language instruction. By drawing attention to the crucial importance of curriculum alignment with teaching materials, teacher training and assessment to increase system effectiveness this project has laid the foundation for the development of education systems that consistently enable positive learning outcomes for all.

Looking ahead, the IBE and its partners believe that the project will increase understanding of what is and is not working as regards early reading curriculum development and reforms. These are already significant outcomes – but the project's findings are expected to be helpful beyond the three national contexts and education systems at stake.

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