

Lessons from Liberia: Reflections and Questions to Ask About Designing Evidence-Based Practices



A child reading from their Read Liberia Student Activity Book.
Photo: RTI.

Questions about why early grade literacy instruction is falling short in the United States have been making national news recently. A key concern centers on why evidence-based practices are not being implemented in classrooms despite strong evidence of what works for learners. RTI coaching specialist Frank McKay gained some perspective on this problem—and potential solutions—when he traveled to Liberia in September 2018 to observe the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Read Liberia Activity this past fall. Mr. McKay works for RTI International’s Center for Education Services that supports the implementation of evidence-based practices in U.S. schools, and he was interested to learn how Read Liberia uses teacher professional development and coaching to improve literacy instruction. He came away impressed by how the design of Read Liberia applies comprehensive supports to help teachers implement sound literacy instruction in the classroom. The following are insights he gained and potential implications for the design of education programs targeting large-scale change.

Signs of Impact

Liberia is still recovering from the impacts of civil war and the Ebola crisis of 2014–2015. To say the challenges Liberian schools face are daunting is more than an understatement. Liberia has a critically low literacy rate of 43%, and only 38% of teachers meet the minimum teaching qualification in primary schools. The challenging context made what I observed in the Read Liberia Activity stand out as both promising and impressive. During my visit, I shadowed teams of coaches who work with teachers to implement Read Liberia in six of Liberia’s 15 counties. I also interviewed local and national leaders about the Activity. Here are some of the positive themes I noted:

- **Equipped teachers:** Read Liberia provides evidence-based instructional materials to teachers and high-quality texts to their students to support literacy instruction. I visited at the beginning of the school year, which was also the end of the rainy season. Flooding in Monrovia was so serious one afternoon that it took 3 hours to travel a few miles from the Read Liberia office to a local library and back, and many rural roads were nearly impassable. Yet, the Read Liberia staff was in high gear working to get curricular materials delivered to all 640 primary schools in the Activity. Read Liberia’s evidence-based curriculum allows teachers who lack essential instructional knowledge and skills to facilitate student learning while they work to develop their practice through professional development and coaching.
- **Dedicated coaches** Central to the Read Liberia model, a cadre of instructional coaches leads professional development and provides follow-up coaching to support implementation in the field. What impressed me about these coaches is similar to what impresses me about many coaches I work with in the United States: they are passionate about student learning and helping teachers grow. I watched these coaches use data gathered during classroom observations to provide timely feedback to teachers. I also saw them coteaching, answering teachers’ questions about literacy instruction, and guiding teachers in reflection and goal-setting to improve instruction—all strategies designed to support teacher growth.
- **Engaged students:** Although class sizes in Liberia tend to be quite large—sometimes 75–90 students in a class—with traditional teacher-centered instruction, students in Read Liberia classrooms held partner discussions about texts, created manipulatives to support the learning of phonics, and sang and danced as teachers guided them in brain breaks.
- **Informed leadership:** School, district, and even national education leaders attend Read Liberia trainings, along with coaches and teachers. Every leader I spoke with understood what literacy instruction should look and sound like in the Read Liberia Activity, and each understood their role in supporting the Activity

and communicating expectations. One official at the Ministry of Education told me he appreciated the Read Liberia Activity so much that he uses strategies he learned with his own children.

- **Partnership:** The Read Liberia Activity engages partners at multiple levels to support success and long-term sustainability. This approach includes a strong partnership with the Ministry of Education, focused on policy that supports national literacy goals. It also includes community outreach at the local level, focused on educating parents about Read Liberia’s goals and providing strategies to increase students’ reading outside of class.

Good Design Is Informed Design

Read Liberia’s design is informed by research and extensive lessons learned from past literacy projects across Africa, including the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) Plus program and the Liberia Teacher Training Program (LTTP). Read Liberia’s interventions combine evidence-based early-literacy instructional practices with multiple supports for teachers implementing those practices, including extended teacher professional development, follow-up coaching, and high-quality curriculum materials to support instruction. It also uses data and feedback at the classroom level to improve practice and at the program level for monitoring and evaluation. Community engagement components enhance local support, while intensive collaboration with the Liberian Ministry of Education helps to create policies, systems, and structures needed to refine and implement the Activity at scale. Although Read Liberia is only in the second of 5 years of implementation, a similar program called Tusome is yielding strong outcomes in Kenya (see <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/bringing-literacy-project-scale-has-kenya-found-holy-grail>).

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A child being assessed. Photo: RTI.

Questions to Ask When Designing Education Interventions

Interventions in education often fail to consider the comprehensive supports needed to achieve the results they promise to deliver, even when promoting evidence-based practices. Although Read Liberia is only in Year 2 of implementation, we can learn from its comprehensive approach to inform the design of interventions in other contexts, including in the United States. Here are five questions to consider when designing an effective, scalable program:

1. **Evidence-based resources:** How can evidence-based program materials support effective implementation in the short term while long-term capacity-building efforts are ongoing?
2. **Coaching:** What tools, training, and support will maximize coach effectiveness in the field as coaches work to support implementation and help teachers improve practice?

3. **Leadership:** How can leaders become well informed about program content to effectively support implementation?
4. **Data:** How and which data will be used to provide useful feedback to those implementing the program on the ground and to inform decision-making by administrators?
5. **Stakeholder input:** How might input from those implementing and receiving programs be used to strengthen program design?

The passion and commitment of the Liberian coaches I met continues to stay with me, as does the dedication of the teachers I engaged with and the enthusiasm of the students with whom they work. And while it does not take a trip to Africa to learn about good program design, one of my key takeaways is a reminder that good design is informed design. Whether we partner to improve literacy, numeracy, or other student outcomes, educators deserve well-designed, contextualized programs that support engaged learning and create lasting impact.

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More Information:

The USAID Read Liberia Activity is a 5-year (September 2017–September 2022) program that aims at improving early grade reading skills for Liberian learners in 640 public schools in Grades 1 and 2. Read Liberia also pilot tested a program to develop emergent literacy skills for Liberian learners in 60 public kindergarten schools. The Activity is implemented in six targeted counties—Lofa, Bong, Grand Bassa, Nimba, Margibi, and Montserrado. Read Liberia is funded by USAID and implemented by RTI International with subcontractors Another Option, Brattle Publishing Group, and DEEP through direct partnership with the Liberian Ministry of Education.

USAID/Liberia

Read Liberia Activity

Chief of Party: Trokon Wayne

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