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Designing a program of teacher professional development to support beginning reading acquisition in coastal Kenya

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ABSTRACT

What should be considered when developing a literacy intervention that asks teachers to implement new instructional methods? How can this be achieved with minimal support within existing policy? We argue that two broad sets of considerations must be made in designing such an intervention. First, the intervention must be effective by bridging the gap between current teacher practice and the scientific literature on effective instruction. This broad consideration is detailed with 10 design recommendations. Second, the intervention must be amenable to being scaled-up and maintained as part of government policy. This involves being (1) simple and replicable; (2) well received by teachers; and (3) cost effective. The paper discusses how these factors were considered in the design of a literacy intervention in government primary schools in coastal Kenya. It also includes reactions from teachers about the intervention and their change in knowledge.

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1. Introduction

Among the multitude of factors influencing student outcomes in sub-Saharan Africa, the knowledge and practices of teachers has arguably the most direct effect and has the greatest potential for intervention through government policy. Many teachers lack confidence in their abilities to improve student learning, even when they rate themselves as professional and consider one of their students' needs (Dubeck and Cook, 2010). Other teachers may be dedicated to their profession but recognize that they do not have the necessary pedagogical knowledge to influence all students' achievement (Dubeck et al., 2012), notably those struggling with learning to read in non-native languages.

The finding that some teachers have that children in sub-Saharan Africa are not reaching their academic potential is supported in the data (UNESCO, 2010). It predominantly shows that children in upper primary grades have minimal reading skills. Furthermore, recent

efforts examining reading abilities for children in lower primary confirm what was observed in the upper grades – children's reading skills are lacking (Cook and Cook, 2009).

The situation in Kenya also points to low literacy levels (Dubeck et al., 2011). Data from Omondi's survey in 70 Kenyan districts show that among grade three children, only 28% can read a Grade 2 English passage and just 30% can read a single word in a grade-level passage (Cook and Cook, 2009).

This evidence calls for a greater emphasis on improving academic outcomes for students. Substantial meta-analyses conducted largely in industrialized countries conclude that the methods used to teach reading have a key influence on successful literacy acquisition (Huggins and Stanbury, 2006; HELLF, 2008; NCHD, 2008). When instruction develops oral language skills (e.g., phonological awareness and vocabulary) and explicitly and systematically explains the relationship between sounds and symbols (i.e., letters), children have the foundation for word identification and reading comprehension. Therefore, to offer effective reading instruction, teachers need to acquire this knowledge and the pedagogy to teach others

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