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Changing literacy instruction in Kenyan classrooms: Assessing pathways of influence to improved early literacy outcomes in the HALI intervention

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Early literacy
Kenya
Instructional practice
Motivation

ABSTRACT

This study uses data from the Health and Literacy Intervention (HALI) program evaluation, an in-service teacher training program focused on early grade literacy instruction for class one students. We assess how changes in classroom instructional practices impacted by the HALI teacher training were associated with improved early literacy outcomes for children. We find that experientially induced increases in exposure to print—measured both through changes in time spent reading in class and through print displayed in the classroom—were associated with improvements in students' reading literacy and reading comprehension. Implications for global education efforts to improve literacy outcomes are discussed.

1. Introduction

Literacy is more than simply the ability to read and write. Literacy skills provide the gateway to afford only connecting to, interpreting and discussing the world in which one lives. In efforts to improve the education and literacy levels of their populations, countries across Sub-Saharan Africa have made tremendous strides in increasing school access to many children over the past fifteen years (UNESCO, 2015). Yet, literacy levels still remain low across the continent. At around 72%, sub-Saharan Africa as a region has the lowest youth literacy rate in the world (UNESCO, 2012). In Kenya specifically, dramatic growth in primary school enrollment—from 65.4% in 2000 to 84.9 in 2012—has driven some success, with youth literacy rates increasing slightly from 82.4% in 2007 to 85.8% in 2013 (World Bank, 2017).

Research suggests that despite being in school, a large portion of children fail to learn functional literacy skills in the first three years of primary school (Gove and Coombs, 2010; Uwezo, 2013). With global education goals shifting from access to school to access to high-quality education and learning (United Nations, 2015), early literacy skills are critical to ensuring learning and literacy outcomes. While evidence is starting to accumulate as to what school-based strategies may seek to improve literacy in early grades in sub-Saharan Africa (O'Donnell, 2013; Gove and Coombs, 2010) and in Kenya in particular (Piper and Zekowski, 2013; Piper et al., 2014; Piper et al., 2015), more studies do not support the mechanisms through which different strategies work (or do not). Research on which strategies support early literacy learning

have been conducted almost exclusively in high-income countries (e.g., Snow et al., 1990; Snow et al., 1993). What specific instructional strategies are malleable to intervention and promote early literacy skills, particularly in linguistically diverse contexts in sub-Saharan Africa? More research is needed on the key elements of successful programs.

Using data from the Health and Literacy Intervention program evaluation (HALI; Jukes et al., 2017), this study assesses which key classroom instructional practices impacted by the program were associated with improved student literacy outcomes over the course of one school year. We assess instructional practices related to the medium of instruction (i.e., using a written medium), the instructional force (i.e., explicit instruction of letters and sounds, explicit instruction of phonological blending and segmenting), and print exposure (i.e., time spent reading in class and the display of print in the classroom).

1.1. Instructional practices that promote early literacy skills

A growing literature over the past three decades has enabled a deep understanding of specific literacy instructional practices that promote children's literacy skills. This work has been conducted almost exclusively in high-income countries. However, because of the difficulties across languages of forming the relationship between oral language and print that represents that language, it may provide a framework from which to begin to study similar processes in other contexts. The provision of high-quality literacy instruction is

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2018.03.004>
Received 11 July 2017; Accepted 26 February 2018
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teachers. We assess how changes in classroom instructional processes impacted by the HALL teacher training were associated with improved early literacy outcomes for children. We find that experimentally induced increases in exposure to print—measured both through changes to time spent reading in class and through print displayed in the classroom—were associated with improvements in students’ reading fluency and reading comprehension. Implications for global education efforts to improve learning outcomes are discussed.

March 08, 2018