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Reading and Writing Camps: Learning through Play and Active Learning

Over the last 10 years, specialists in international education have become increasingly aware of the importance of children learning to read in the early grades and the failure of many school systems to help children acquire the skills needed to be good readers and writers early in the schooling process. This realization has led to a new focus on “early grade reading” and many innovative and promising approaches for addressing this need.

There are many children, however, who are already beyond the reach of early grade reading programs and have not acquired the necessary reading or writing skills needed to succeed in school.¹ Few school systems in developing countries have the human or financial resources needed to launch a systematic remedial program to address the needs of these children still in school but have not mastered the foundational reading and writing skills needed to learn effectively.

The EQUIP 1 Education Reform Program (ERP) in Egypt works closely with the Ministry of Education (MOE) to address the professional development needs of teachers and improve learning outcomes of students. As part of this work, ERP staff in the seven project supported governorates² have collaborated with MOE counterparts to develop a tool to assess reading and writing skills in primary schools. After the assessment results showed that as many as 35% of learners in project supported schools had not acquired the fundamental reading and writing skills they needed, ERP began a series of teacher professional development activities to enhance the skills of Grade 1 – 3 teachers in teaching early grade reading and writing.



Students perform a skit at the end of the camp to demonstrate for parents and community members things they have learned

¹ In Egypt, the Youth Literacy Rate was 73.4 percent in 2004, indicating that 26.6 percent of people aged 15-24 could not read and write simple statements relating to their everyday life (UN Common Database, UNESCO, last accessed June 2009, http://globalis.gvu.unu.edu/indicator_detail.cfm?IndicatorID=41&Country=EG).

² Aswan, Qena, Minia, Beni Suef, Fayoum, Cairo and Alexandria.



Students writing letters and words in a competitive game using chalk power on the play ground

In the process, ERP staff became aware that communities (Boards of Trustees, parents and teachers) were concerned about upper grade students still struggling with reading and writing, and they were eager to try to address this problem. In response, ERP joined forces with schools, communities and district level MOE officials to design and carry out *Reading and Writing Camps* to provide tailored remedial opportunities for upper grade students.

Background on Reading and Writing within ERP's School Based Reform Approach

In the fall of 2007, ERP identified improving reading and writing skills as a priority necessary to improve student outcomes, which is the goal of school based reform. ERP's Effective Schools component undertook a three-pronged approach, built on the components of school based reform. First, the project supported efforts to build teachers' understanding and ability to use a phonetic approach to teaching reading. Second, project technical advisors with expertise in teaching material development collaborated with teachers to design and enhance instructional materials that teachers could use in conjunction with the Egyptian curriculum and textbooks. These first two efforts resulted in a training of trainers model for selected educators with expertise and responsibilities for enhancing reading and writing in primary schools.

These trained educators, who were primarily supervisors and senior teachers and who represented all governorates in which ERP works, were then responsible for training other teachers and supervisors in their governorates. Finally, the project prioritized working with communities and district officials to increase opportunities and create contexts for all children to read and write more.

As ERP moved forward in implementing this three pronged approach, it became clear that efforts to increase teacher capacity and to expand reading opportunities could be effectively combined to improve reading in the early grades while also being adapted to provide remedial learning opportunities outside of schools. This was done through *Reading and Writing Camps* carried out in a variety of formats depending on the needs and interests of a given community. While some camps were conducted during the summer for a period of 2 to 3 weeks, other "camps" were held over a series of weekends or after school hours.

Learning through Play

Reading and Writing Camps are designed to provide children with an intense experience that will allow them to catch up by mastering foundational reading skills. Since camps are held outside of the regular school day, they are conducive to trying innovative classroom approaches and teaching reading and writing through play by building on active teaching and learning techniques. They may also provide students with rewarding and enjoyable reading and writing experiences.

These camps are run by teachers and volunteers who had participated in the ERP Early Reading and Writing Training of Trainers (ToT) workshops. As mentioned above, the ToTs were founded on Egyptian textbooks and curriculum and used a phonetics based approach. Teacher trainings aimed to improve the teaching of reading and writing by providing techniques to help teachers utilize what is currently in place while adding value to existing resources. In turn, teachers and volunteers were also provided with a general set of materials designed by an ERP local Arabic language consultant.



A young girl in Aswan practices writing outside the school yard



Girls in Minia play the handkerchief game which tests their knowledge of letters and spelling as their teacher record the words they call off

While camp programming is similar to early reading and writing programming, it focuses on non-conventional interactive approaches. The use of active games, art, song, and drama allows children to gain basic skills in phonetics, reading fluency and comprehension, and provides a learning environment that is motivating and fun. For example, students may learn letters by playing games that require repetition of sound or practice writing by playing with chalk dust in the school yard or by actually molding letters out of clay and then forming words with those letters. Not only do these strategies effectively transfer skills while motivating students; they also provide teachers with an opportunity to practice interactive teaching methods in a more informal environment.



In Minia, teams of boys race to collect all cards that have correct words

The camps primarily target students in grades 4 through 8 whose reading and writing skills are below grade level. To identify these students, a reading and writing test based on the Egyptian curriculum and developed together with an Arabic language expert was administered to all 4th through 8th graders. Priority was given to students whose reading and writing skills lagged behind their grade level.



Boys in Minia cut out letters

A Community Approach to Implementation

The Egyptian MOE supports school based reform efforts that empower communities and local schools and education officials to become agents of change for their schools. In this instance, the results of a survey conducted by ERP, in cooperation with the Education Directorate, showing that a high number of children were not acquiring basic reading and writing skills acted as a wake-up call for local communities. Once aware of the magnitude of the problem, teachers, parents, Board of Trustees, local NGOs, and district level MOE mobilized and became actively involved in creating interventions, while collaborating with ERP to develop early reading and writing materials and the training of trainers.

Likewise, while ERP made a commitment to financially support *Reading and Writing Camps* for the first year (including trainings, materials and teacher per diems), community contributions started immediately. Parents volunteered; schools housed the camps; and local NGOs donated snacks, provided volunteers and collaboratively ran after-school programs. School Boards of Trustees participated in planning activities and made home visits to families to encourage them to send their children to class and camps. Furthermore, local communities tailored the scheduling of camps to fit their needs. While camps were originally planned to be held during summer break, some communities wanted a more immediate intervention and planned mini camps to be held after-school, on the weekends and during mid-year breaks before the arrival of the summer holiday.

Initial Results

Formative assessment of students' mastery of the new skills is used throughout the camps and after school programs and at the end of each camp and after school program, a final assessment is also conducted. Informal results from pre- and post- assessments indicate that students who participate in the camps show significant improvement in their reading and writing skills. These assessments have also been used to help schools and teachers adjust camp and classroom teaching strategies and support for students who continue to face challenges. In addition camp activities have made acquiring reading and writing skills more fun for students and, in general, students enjoyed camp activities and did not want camps to end. Perhaps more importantly, classroom teachers are noticing that students who have participated in the camps and after-school programs are now learning more effectively in the classroom.



In Minia, girls hold up cards used in a matching game



After camp, student projects were displayed for parents and community members in Aswan

An unintended outcome of the camps is that participating teachers are said to be incorporating reading and writing lesson plans from camps in their classrooms. While it can be difficult for teachers to use new active learning techniques in their classrooms after receiving training, initial results indicate that camps and after-school programs provided teachers with an opportunity to practice their newly learned skills in a more informal, relaxed environment making them more comfortable with using them when they return to their own classrooms. In addition, since teachers trained volunteers to assist with camps and to run after-school programs, they further reinforce their newly acquired skills and techniques.

More broadly, camps have engaged communities in the education of their children/students and have demonstrated that a school based reform approach does make a difference. Increasing awareness that the way reading and writing is being taught in their schools is not meeting the needs of all their students and finding a way to collectively address this has provided schools with an opportunity to connect and work with parents, community-based organizations and local community members. The result has been an increased value placed on literacy and education and a more supportive environment in which all children can learn more effectively.

Beyond ERP: After Year One

Since ERP only made a one-year financial commitment to support Reading and Writing Camps, in the second year it is the responsibility of local communities to not only take full ownership of reading and writing initiatives but to fund programming themselves. A handover made more achievable because the overall cost of camp implementation is low with a total cost of approximately \$5 US Dollars per child per camp.³ Early community ownership and involvement in planning and implementation has also facilitated this process and will likely increase the sustainability of the program. To further guarantee that remedial reading and writing initiatives continue, Reading and Writing Committees have also been formed in participating communities so as to support schools in their commitment to improving the reading and writing skills of their students. At the time of this writing, preparations for camps are well underway and the implementation of the second year of camps has already commenced in many communities.

Conclusion

While schools must continue to improve the skills of their teachers so that students acquire reading and writing skills at an early age, if these skills are not acquired there are remedial strategies and techniques that can also be implemented to help older students who struggle with reading and writing. The *Reading and Writing Camps* promoted by ERP is an example of a program that addresses these issues outside of school hours and, based on initial results, appears to be readily capable of being replicated, adapted and scaled-up.

Contact Information

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³ This amount includes teacher stipends, lunches for children, camp T-shirts and materials. However, it excludes venue costs, since camps were held for free in school buildings, and the initial development of materials, which was done by local consultant and cost approximately \$1500 U.S. These teaching materials were used by all camps and were paid for by ERP in Year One.