

## Integration of Phonics-Based Literacy Approaches into the Tanzanian Primary Curriculum

The United Republic of Tanzania has implemented different educational programs to improve teaching and learning outcomes for lower and early grades (Rawle, 2015). The National Examination Council of Tanzania's report on the education sector found, however, that in 2021, grade two pupils had difficulty using punctuation marks appropriately and differentiating capital letters from small letters. It also stated that literacy learning outcomes for primary pupils do not meet Tanzania's needs for the twenty-first century and went on to discuss the pedagogical issues associated with poor reading.

In this context, USAID's Tanzania Education Office funded this research project, which was implemented by the University of Dodoma, to improve pre-primary through grade 4 literacy skills. Through co-creation with stakeholders, the following three research questions (RQs) were investigated.

### Summary of Policy-Relevant Findings

**RQ1: What are the most effective and cost-effective indicators and measures for monitoring teachers' phonics-based literacy instruction?**

- Teachers and Quality Assurers identified pupil letter knowledge as the most effective and cost-effective indicator for monitoring teachers' literacy instruction. Respondents also said that they used lower-level reading skills like letter knowledge to monitor pupils' phonics literacy progress.
- In practice, respondents usually measure pupils' phonics learning by verbally asking comprehension questions. They prefer this method since they currently lack written, research-informed questionnaires.
- The most effective measures of literacy instruction are those that are quick and easy-to-use.

**RQ2: To what extent do teachers' preparation and professional experience in phonics-based literacy instruction help predict their pupils' literacy?**

- Teachers' training and professional experience are positively correlated with the enhancement of pupil's literacy skills, though even trained teachers felt they were inadequately prepared to teach phonics well. This research found that seminars and workshops enhanced teachers' ability to both develop teaching aids and help pupils sound out letters.
- Teachers have limited knowledge of how to use locally available raw materials (e.g., pebbles, crop seeds, sand) to prepare literacy learning aids.
- Educators heavily favor conventional materials over digital resources in reading instruction.

### Key Takeaways

**Increasing funding** for in-service literacy training would prepare teachers to better teach phonics

**Capacity strengthening** would help teachers use locally available resources to promote children's literacy

Teachers and parents need help understanding how **technology can help them to develop children's literacy skills**

Early grade teachers often overlook the importance of the **principles of inclusion** that enhance literacy development

- The language barrier for minority-language pupils made teaching Kiswahili literacy challenging.
- Educators need more clarity on how language instruction could best support early grade children who were emerging bilinguals and were not yet fluent in spoken Kiswahili.
- When interviewed, early grade teachers said little about inclusion in learning.
- Teachers' lesson preparation often overlooks their learners' specific characteristics, strengths, and needs.
- Limited funding means that few teachers participate in in-service training.
- Overcrowding and short teaching time made teachers pay less attention to individualized reading instruction, in particular for emergent bilingual children.



### RQ3: What opportunities exist within the education ecosystem for teachers to promote phonics-based literacy?

- Teachers can better promote phonics literacy by improving how they work with families, using appropriate locally available and low-cost materials, and improving their use of technology. Better training would help them in these tasks.
- Teachers are generally unaware of the few available opportunities in the school system that would help them better teach children to read. Teachers did not mention accessing teacher resource centers or local teacher colleges for training, and they rarely pursue individual training through their local schools.
- Educational management rarely supports teachers in developing and using phonics instructional materials.
- Most teachers and parents miss the opportunity to use technology to enhance children's literacy skills.

## Policy Recommendations

- Better capacity strengthening would help teachers better prepare and implement their phonics lessons. The *Ministry of Education, Science and Technology* could use in-service training like that organized by the USAID Tusome Pamoja project as a model.
- The *Ministry of Education, Science and Technology* and the *Ministry of Education and Vocational Training* should develop and institutionalize tools to assess phonics instruction, which would especially help Quality Assurers.
- The *Ministry of Education, Science and Technology* should strengthen teachers' capacity to positively interact with and better assist parents in making their homes environments promote literacy. Parents have a limited understanding of how the home environment helps students learn to read, and teachers should help coach them.
- Teachers and Quality Assurers currently struggle to use evidence-based means to measure pupil's literacy progress or assess literacy instruction. They report rarely receiving any support in these tasks. If they knew more about what effective, low-cost indicators to use, better reading instruction would result. Educational policy makers and donors should use professional development programs to make teachers more able to assess teaching and its outcomes.



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