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UNICEF EDUCATION

Education Case Study

SIERRA LEONE

Training, inspiring and motivating early grade teachers to strengthen children's skills in literacy and numeracy

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Sierra Leone, per its [Education Sector Plan 2018-2020](#), is committed to improving literacy and numeracy in the early grades, as these foundational skills are vital to students' future academic performance and economic, social and civic participation. To initiate informed action, UNICEF, together with the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) and technical partner Montrose, conducted a [national baseline assessment in 2021](#) to establish the reading and numeracy skills of 4,729 students (2,348 girls) in Grades 2 and 4. The study revealed that while students are increasingly able to identify words and read text fluently, their understanding of those words and conceptual ability to apply skills to other tasks are limited. Students demonstrated notably higher skills in basic, procedural math tasks, but significantly lower conceptual skills. Boys outperformed girls in the majority of tasks.

Importantly, nearly a quarter of the 476 teachers surveyed had only a basic education and lacked certified training to become a teacher. The Government, recognizing that foundational learning cannot happen without skilled teachers, veered attention towards upgrading the skills of in-service and pre-service primary school teachers.

In July 2021 UNICEF, together with the MBSSE and Teaching Service Commission (TSC), initiated an early grade teacher training programme to improve literacy and mathematics skills among children in Grades 1-3. The strategy comprises in-service teacher training on key areas of gender sensitive pedagogy and practice in reading and numeracy; coaching of teachers; and establishment of communities of practice as networks for teachers to gain mutual support and learning. Through trained quality assurance inspectors, teachers receive continuous on-ground academic support and supervision.

Another essential component is pre-service teacher training, to build a strong cadre of potential early grade teachers. This involved creating modular courses in reading and numeracy, which UNICEF piloted, finalised and certified

in six Teacher Training Institutes (TTIs). To expand teachers' access to quality reading and numeracy content, UNICEF is helping to equip the TTIs with various teaching and learning resources as well as tools in information and communication technology.

Additionally, the Government recognised a gap in foundational literacy and numeracy training for teachers of older students in Grades 3-5. In response, UNICEF and MBSSE, with technical support from [Pratham](#), initiated a [Teaching at Right Level \(TaRL\)](#) pilot in January 2022 covering 20 schools across Western Rural, Western Urban and Port Loko Districts. This is an independent project aiming to accelerate learning for students in Grades 3-5 who are not at age-appropriate education levels. The model assesses children with a simple reading and arithmetic tool, using this information to group children according to their current learning levels rather than by age or grade. An evaluation of the pilot is forthcoming.

RESULTS

- Starting in July 2021, the MBSSE, TSC and UNICEF helped train a first cohort of 6,925 teachers (2,144 female) in reading and numeracy, or 46 per cent of all early grade teachers in the six low performing districts of Bombali, Kambia, Karene, Kenema, Moyamba and Pujehun. Support is ongoing through a community of practice. This teacher training has benefited 452,994 students (231,252 girls) in Grades 1-3.
- The Government and UNICEF, together with CODE and the Education Development Trust, are also training the next cohort of 4,853 teachers (1,456 female) in reading and numeracy, or 74 per cent of all early grade teachers in the same six districts plus three additional ones: Kono, Port Loko and Western Rural. Together, these two cohorts of trained teachers are reaching about 600,000 learners in Grades

1-3. They jointly comprise 39 per cent of all early grade teachers in the country trained in foundational literacy and numeracy.

- UNICEF contributed to two modular courses in reading and numeracy for institutionalisation within pre-service TTIs, to be used to prepare the future cadre of early grade teachers.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **Train teachers in accelerated education programmes.** This supports children who lack age and grade level competencies in reading and numeracy.
- **More work must be done to strengthen TTIs and develop institutional teacher training resources.** This is integral to enhancing in-service and pre-service teacher training, supporting sustainability and using resources efficiently.
- **Build strong and collaborative partnerships.** To deliver planned results, partnerships across ministries, government departments and others are critical to optimise technical and financial resources and build ownership.

NEXT STEPS

In the next year, UNICEF aims to bolster local capacities as TTIs will deliver in-service and pre-service teacher training in reading and numeracy. Based on the success of the TaRL pilot, UNICEF will also explore the possibility of scaling up that strategy, together with the Government. In June 2022, UNICEF Sierra Leone joined the World Bank in the [accelerator programme](#) and is rolling out communication and advocacy work around foundational learning indicators, providing advisory and analytical services and promoting collaboration and partnerships in foundational literacy and numeracy.

Cost effectiveness: From May 2021 to date, UNICEF Sierra Leone, with generous support from Global Partnership for Education, has provided over US \$3 million to ensure that more than 600,000 children acquire foundational skills in literacy and numeracy that are essential for further learning, productive employment and civic engagement.

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