

Early Grade Reading Assessments Shed Light on Learners' Reading Skills after Two Years of School Closures



Image description:

An ICYD enumerator and a primary 3 student sit outside together for an Early Grade Reading Assessment.

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Cohort I Midline Evaluation Success Story

From March 2020 until January 2022, the Ugandan government closed schools in response to the COVID-19. Lasting 22 months, the closure is one of the most prolonged school shutdowns in the world.

During this time, learners formed Home Learning Study Groups, which provide a degree of continuity for 17,500 children in primary 1–4. Each community-based group included around 20-25 children who could range in age by as many as 7 years. Some groups were led by certified teachers, others by volunteers—all using paper materials to continue children’s learning in foundation areas. The study groups are part of the USAID-funded Integrated Child and Youth Development (ICYD) project, awarded in August 2020.

A midline evaluation of the ICYD project was initially slated to start in the summer of 2021. However, COVID-related disruptions continually pushed back the evaluation until November 2021. The midline evaluation—an adaptation from the project’s original plan—measured the reading abilities of learners in ICYD-supported areas, instructional factors affecting learning, and drivers of vulnerability that lead to dropout and nonenrolment.

Reading assessments are usually done at school, but in November 2021, ICYD assessed 3,000 learners from home learning study groups. Using an Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA), learners’ reading skills were assessed in English as well as one of three Ugandan languages—Luganda, Runyankore-Rukiga and Runyoro-Rutooro.

Results from this novel home learning group-based assessment were finalized and shared in February 2022. Data showed that the long-term school shutdowns negatively impacted children’s reading comprehension, fluency, and literacy. From ICYD’s baseline evaluation (October 2018) to the midline evaluation, the percentage of primary 2 learners meeting learning benchmarks decreased in all three target language zones. Learners in the Runyankore-Rukiga and Runyoro-Rutooro zones experienced greater vulnerabilities leading to higher rates of dropouts and nonenrolment. And there was often a mismatch between the language children spoke at home and the language facilitators used in study groups.

While these results are not surprising given just how extensive school shutdowns were, the results also highlight unexpected findings. For instance, in most cases, girls performed better than boys. In the Runyankore-Rukiga language zone, girls outperformed boys on all four reading subtasks (letter sound identification, invented word reading, oral reading fluency, and reading comprehension). Additionally, learners from all zones tended to perform better in English than in their target Ugandan language.

Although the findings of the ICYD’s midline evaluation are initially disheartening, they provide valuable insight into the effects of school closures on learning acquisition and best practices for home-based learning. For instance, population movements during the pandemic may explain stronger results in English. Similarly, differentiated instructional practices or home conditions may explain girls’ stronger performance compared to boys. These—and more—are questions that merit further inquiry.

Beyond the results themselves, the ICYD project’s successful adaption of the midline evaluation is notable. ICYD adapted the research design, data collection, EGRA, and analysis to the newly formed HLSGs. These adaptations and findings will help inform the work of future ICYD research. They also serve as an example for future projects, especially in an unprecedented or unforeseen global event.

Pullout Quote:

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Background Information:

In March 2020, COVID-19 swept the globe and caused some of the most widespread and long-lasting institutional shutdowns in decades. Many Ugandan learners faced the possibility of never going back to school again. As a result, Ugandan communities banded together to form home learning study groups to recreate a school environment outside of school. ICYD captured the impact of this novel learning model through an adapted learning assessment and research design.