



Early-Grade Literacy in Rwanda: Taking Stock in 2016



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Education Development Center, Inc.

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Executive Summary

Rwanda has made commendable efforts to improve basic education, including literacy in the early grades. Students are learning to read and write in Kinyarwanda, and they are acquiring the language skills to read and write in English. The Ministry of Education's Rwanda Education Board and its development partners have laid a firm strategic and policy foundation for continuing to raise literacy rates.

The results of three literacy skills assessments of P1–P4 students, which were administered in samples of schools nationwide between 2011 and 2014, show that many students are acquiring literacy skills. Two additional tests, administered between 2013 and 2015, found that improvements in literacy performance are, at least in part, the result of new methods and materials for teaching literacy. These new approaches are now being implemented across Rwanda in the early grades. The assessments also found that children's acquisition of literacy skills is influenced by their school and classroom environment, home environment, and socioeconomic status. The quality of their instruction depends on not only the teacher's qualifications and behavior but also on the availability of books to read, time to read, the physical condition of the school, the home environment, and the family's socioeconomic status. The frequency of teacher and student absences as well as the distance between the school and the district office also make a difference in who becomes literate. Improvements in early-grade literacy instruction are shaped by the Ministry of Education's (MINEDUC's) strategic framework, as presented in the Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP) and the Mid Term Review of the ESSP, and the policies formulated by the Rwanda Education Board technical working groups.

These groups, comprising Rwanda Education Board (REB) officials and donor partner representatives, have worked diligently on complex policies and plans that are paving the way for continuing improvements in instruction in areas including curriculum and assessment, language in education, teacher development and management, learning and teaching materials, and school readiness. The introduction in 2016 of a competence-based curriculum will unite official policy on instruction with the literacy materials and methods that have been introduced by the MINEDUC, assisted by the following partners:

- U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)
- Education Development Center, Inc. (EDC)
- Save the Children
- Department for International Development (DFID)
- UNICEF
- Other international and Rwandan nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)

Raising literacy rates also depends on (1) strengthening ties between MINEDUC and the Ministry of Local Government (MINALOC), whose district officials are responsible for schools and teachers, and (2) improving the culture of reading (the availability of reading materials and the reading habits of parents and community members, who model behavior for children).

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List of Abbreviations

CEFR.....	Common European Framework of Reference
CPD.....	Continuing professional development
CPMD.....	Curriculum and Pedagogical Materials Department
DEO.....	District Director of Education
DFID.....	Department for International Development (UK)
ECD.....	Early childhood development
ECE.....	Early childhood education
EDC.....	Education Development Center
EGRA.....	Early-Grade Reading Assessment
ELMI.....	Early Literacy and Math Initiative
ESSP.....	Education Sector Strategic Plan
FARS.....	Fluency Assessment of Rwandan Schools
FAWE.....	Forum for African Women Educationalists
HLE.....	Home Literacy Environment
ICT.....	information and communications technology
IEE.....	International Education Exchange
ITOCA.....	Information Training and Outreach Centre of Africa
JRES.....	Joint Review of the Education Sector
KAP.....	Knowledge, attitudes, practice
LARS.....	Learning Assessment of Rwandan Schools
LAST.....	Improving Learning Outcomes through Language Supportive Textbooks and Pedagogy (British)
LTM.....	Learning and Teaching Materials
MIGEPROF.....	Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion
MINALOC.....	Ministry of Local Government
MINEDUC.....	Ministry of Education
MINISPOC.....	Ministry of Sports and Culture
NCDC.....	National Curriculum Development Center
NGO.....	Nongovernmental organization
OLPC.....	One Laptop Per Child
RCBI.....	Rwandan Children’s Book Initiative
RCT.....	Randomized control trial
REB.....	Rwanda Education Board
RTI.....	Research Triangle Institute
SEO.....	Sector Education Officer
SES.....	Social-economic Status
TAC.....	Textbook Advisory Committee
TDM.....	Teacher Development and Management
TTC.....	Teacher Training College
TVET.....	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UR-CE.....	University of Rwanda’s College of Education
USAID.....	U.S. Agency for International Development
VSO.....	Volunteer Services Overseas

Introduction

Rwanda's introduction of a new curriculum in 2016 offers an opportunity to take stock of a cornerstone of the Rwandan education system: literacy in the early grades. Indeed, the critical importance of literacy is presented in Vision 2020,¹ with a literacy rate of 100% as one of the indicators of achieving the vision.² Literacy is recognized as an imperative in strengthening Rwanda's economy: "Improvements in quality of education and health will be crucial for providing an efficient and productive workforce."³ This vision is supported by evidence across the globe of the connection between literacy and a productive workforce.⁴

In its elaboration of Vision 2020, the Education Sector Strategic Plan of 2013–2018 (ESSP)⁵ states that the new curriculum will "acknowledge the importance of improving literacy by placing an increased emphasis on the development of key reading and writing skills across the grade levels, and in particular in early primary."⁶ The draft Mid Term Review of progress toward the goals of the ESSP⁷ finds, however, that targets in basic education are not being met on schedule. It states emphatically that "the principal focus for primary education for the next two and a half years must therefore be on pursuing strategies and activities that will help children learn better in the early years of their education. Without solid foundations in numeracy and literacy, students cannot progress to secondary and tertiary education, and in most cases will also struggle with technical and vocational courses."⁸

This report is intended to consolidate evidence related to early-grade reading progress in Rwanda in order to support continued progress on the ESSP and inform decision making around future early-grade activities. It addresses the following questions:

1. Are children in Rwanda's primary schools learning to read?
2. Is literacy instruction improving?
3. Which children are learning to read? What conditions make a difference?
4. How do the Ministry of Education's (MINEDUC's) strategic and policy frameworks aim to improve literacy?
5. How do institutional dynamics affect literacy?
6. How does the cultural environment affect literacy?

1. Are Children Learning to Read?

The evidence that children are learning to read comes primarily from three literacy skills assessments of students in P1, P2, P3 and/or P4, which were administered in samples of schools nationwide between March 2011 and October 2014. These three assessments used different tests

¹ Republic of Rwanda, Rwanda Vision 2020, revised 2012.

² Ibid., 29.

³ Ibid., 7.

⁴ See, for example, Coulombe, Serge, and Jean-Francois Tremblay. (2004). Literacy scores, human capital and growth across fourteen OECD countries. Ottawa, Canada: Department of Economics, University of Ottawa.

⁵ Republic of Rwanda, Ministry of Education, Education Sector Strategic Plan 2013/14 to 2017/18.

⁶ Ibid., 54.

⁷ Education Sector Strategic Plan 2013/14 to 2017/18; Mid Term Review Draft 2, January 27, 2016

⁸ Ibid., 47.

and looked at somewhat different aspects of literacy skills.⁹ They all point to the fact that many—though by no means all—Rwandan children know how to read in the Kinyarwanda language.

2011 Early-Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA)

The Early-Grade Reading Assessment was administered in March 2011 by the Research Triangle Institute (RTI), a USAID implementer, in cooperation with the MINEDUC. The test assessed the oral reading fluency and comprehension in Kinyarwanda of students at P2-P3 levels;¹⁰ that is, it tested how quickly a student could read a passage of grade-level text correctly and answer questions that demonstrated her understanding of the passage (Box 1). The EGRA was given to 420 students randomly selected from P4¹¹ sections in two to four schools in each of 14 districts. They were given a text to read aloud and timed to count how many words they read correctly in one minute (wcpm). Then they were asked up to five questions to determine how well they comprehended what they had read. These were “locator” or recall questions, which did not require inference or interpretation. Table 1 shows the results of these two tests.

Table 1. Results of EGRA tests of Kinyarwanda oral reading fluency and comprehension

Fluency		Comprehension	
Words correct per minute read	% of students reading in the wcpm* range	% correct answers of attempted answers	% students in the range
0	13	0	27
1–15	13	1–50	10
16–30	35	51–80	30
31–45	30	81–100	32
46–60	7		
61–75	2		

*words correct per minute

Table 1 shows that 39% of the students were correctly reading more than 30 words per minute, and 62% of the students gave correct answers to half or more of the comprehension questions that they attempted to answer. RTI concluded that “it would appear that students are learning some of the mechanics of reading in Kinyarwanda, but many are not reading with sufficient comprehension...of subject area content.”¹²

⁹ Each of the assessments also included mathematics, and one included P6 students, as well, but those results are outside the parameters of this report, so they are not included.

¹⁰ DeStefano, J., W. Ralaingita, M. Costello, A. Sax, and A. Frank (2012). *Early grade reading and mathematics in Rwanda: Final report* (p. 3). Research Triangle Park, NC: RTI International. An EGRA test was also administered orally in English to P4 students, but the report on results is limited, concluding that students “had not yet been able to build even a basic vocabulary in English.”

¹¹ Because the study took place at the start of the academic year, students at the start of P4 were tested, using P2–P3-level content.

¹² DeStefano et al., *Early Grade Reading ... Final Report*, 5.

Box 1. Oral Fluency and Comprehension

The instructional goal for early-grade students is that they learn to comprehend what they read. The design and focus of EGRA and other tests of fluency and comprehension are based on the theory that a minimum level of reading speed is essential to comprehension. The body of research most often used to support EGRA and similar tests holds that “to understand a simple passage, given the capacity of short-term memory, students should read a minimum of 45–60 words per minute.”*

Early-grade reading programs that have this joint fluency-comprehension target often focus heavily, at least initially, on decoding skills in order to help students increase their reading speed. These skills include:

- Phonemic awareness (understanding the sounds letters make in words —e.g., naming the beginning sound of a word)
- Letter sound knowledge (saying the sound that a letter makes)
- Reading syllables (a consonant and a vowel together —e.g., *ba*)
- Reading short, familiar words
- Reading invented words (a way to assess decoding skills)

*Abadzi, H. (2011). Reading fluency measurements in EFA FTI partner countries: Outcomes and improvement prospects. Washington, DC: Global Partnership for Education Series on Learning, #1.

2011 Learning Assessment of Rwandan Schools

In June 2011, several months after the EGRA was administered, the MINEDUC conducted the Learning Assessment of Rwandan Schools (LARS),¹³ an assessment of literacy performance funded by UNICEF and UNESCO. The test was given to P4 students, though the items were based on the P3 Kinyarwanda curriculum. The test was designed using an international framework for testing adult literacy.¹⁴ It was a written assessment of specific competences in four areas:

1. Vocabulary (match objects with their names)
2. Sentence construction (read, comprehend, respond to questions; complete sentences using appropriate words; and match different elements to make complete matching sentences)
3. Shapes and patterns (identify and write down the names of shapes)
4. Numbers (read given numbers and use them correctly).

All 30 districts in Rwanda were covered by the study. Two schools were randomly chosen from each district for a total of 60 schools, and pupils were randomly selected from each school. The LARS was given to 2,420 students sampled from public schools and government-supported private schools. Scores are reported in terms of “curricular expectations,” which are derived from the P3 curriculum though not referenced in the LARS report.

The LARS report summarizes the distribution of reading literacy scores as one “in which the majority of students either meet (55%) or exceed (8%) curricular expectations....A sizeable

¹³ Rwanda Education Board. (January 2012). *Learning achievement in Rwandan schools (LARS)*. Kigali, RW.

¹⁴Ibid., 19. This was the “framework developed for the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) and subsequently applied in the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALL) and the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC).”

minority of students (37%) fail to meet expectations.”¹⁵ The standards for meeting and exceeding expectations were set by the LARS team. The average student score was about 49 on a scale of 1 to 114; that is, 43% of a perfect score.

2014 Oral Reading Fluency Assessment of Rwandan Schools

Three years and three months after the LARS was administered, a third nationwide literacy assessment was conducted, this time by Education Development Center, a USAID implementer, in cooperation with MINEDUC. The Oral Reading Fluency Assessment of Rwandan Schools (FARS)¹⁶ was administered as a baseline assessment in September 2014, prior to the national-scale rollout of the USAID-funded Literacy, Language, and Learning (L3) intervention. The FARS was given to one section each of P1, P2, and P3 students in two schools in each of the 30 districts, for a total of 60 schools and 1,799 students. Schools, sections, and students were randomly selected (but gender balanced). Like the EGRA, the FARS is an oral test of reading fluency and comprehension, and the test is similar to the EGRA. Students were given a text to read aloud and timed to count how many words they read correctly in one minute. Following this, they were asked five questions to determine how well they comprehended what they had read. Like the EGRA, these were “locator” or recall questions.

P3 (and P5) standards in Kinyarwanda and English were defined in May 2012 by a National Standards Committee, comprising 18 representatives of the REB and international partners, and subsequently approved by the REB. The proposed standards for reading fluency in P3 Kinyarwanda are 33–47 wcpm.¹⁷ FARS data were analyzed against these standards to derive a national snapshot of baseline student performance in fluency and comprehension.

Table 2 shows that 18% of P3 students were meeting the proposed standards for their grade level, and 6% were exceeding those standards. Since there were no standards developed for P1 and P2 in 2014, the draft proficiency (fluency) standards for P3 were used for analysis of P1 and P2 scores, as well, but with no expectations that students in the lower grades would meet the P3 standards.

Table 2 shows the percentages of students at each grade level who scored in the “below proficiency” and “proficient” ranges, and further breakdown of words correct per minute (wcpm) scores within those ranges.

¹⁵ Ibid., 42.

¹⁶ Education Development Center. (2014, November). *USAID/L3: National fluency and mathematics assessment baseline report*.

¹⁷ Clark-Chiarelli, N. (2012). *Proposed national reading standards, Kinyarwanda and English, P3 & P5*. Referencing Abadzi (2001), Clark-Chiarelli notes that students reading text in Bantu-based languages such as Kinyarwanda often encounter longer, multi-syllabic words than in other languages such as English. When words in agglutinating languages such as Kinyarwanda are “broken down into words which exist independently in English, the number of words increases by 30 percent...” Thus, the proposed national standards for reading fluency and in P3 Kinyarwanda (33-47 WCPM) are equivalent to a standard of 43-61 WCPM in English.

Table 2. FARS results for P3, P2, and P1 on the FARS baseline assessment

Words correct per minute (wcpm)	Below P3 proficiency level			Proficient at P3 level		Total
	0	1–19	20–32	33–47	47+	
% of P3 scores at each level	21	17	37	18	6	100
% of P2 scores at each level	33	17	25	20	5	100
% of P1 scores at each level	60	34	5	0	0	100

In addition to proficiency (fluency) standards, the National Standards Committee proposed standards for comprehension of text, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Comprehension standards proposed in 2012

Does not meet standards	Meets standards	Exceeds standards
0–44% correct answers	46–69% correct	70+% correct

The FARS defined answering four out of five questions correctly (equivalent to 80% comprehension) as “meeting expectations.” Table 4 shows the overall results of the comprehension tests.

Table 4. Comprehension results for P3, P2 and P1

	Number of questions answered correctly by students (%)						
	Below expectations				Meets expectations		Total
Number of questions	0	1	2	3	4	5	
P3 students	26.2	16.5	27.1	24.3	4.2	1.8	100
P2 students	37.6	2.6	8.5	17.2	19.2	14.9	100
P1 students	68.6	12.4	9.0	3.8	3.7	2.5	100

Since many of those tested were not proficient in fluency, they could hardly be expected to answer questions correctly. To better understand the comprehension profile of Rwandan students, FARS analysis therefore also included examination of the comprehension scores of students who read at least 80% of the text correctly. Table 5 shows the results of this group.

Table 5. Comprehension results for P3 and P2 students who read 80% of the text correctly

	Number of questions answered correctly by students (%)						
	Below expectations				Meets expectations		Total
Number of questions	0	1	2	3	4	5	
P3 students	3.3	11.8	27.4	40.2	12.3	5.0	100
P2 students	12.5		5.3	23.8	17.5	41.0	100

Table 5 shows that 17.3% of the students in P3 who read most of the text correctly answered at least four of the five questions correctly. Students in P2 scored better than the class ahead of them, with 58.5% answering at least four questions correctly.

Summary of Findings – Are Children Learning to Read?

Findings from the three assessments that have been conducted in Rwanda show that children are learning to read, although the assessments are difficult to compare and summarize for the following reasons:

1. There is considerable divergence in what the tests measure. While both EGRA and FARS test the same skills (fluency and comprehension), the LARS tests other skills (vocabulary, sentence construction, etc.).
2. The three tests use different standards of proficiency. The FARS baseline assessment has clear standards for proficiency at P3 but none for other grades. The LARS refers not to standards but to “grade expectations,” which are not defined in the baseline report. The EGRA references no standards or expectations.
3. The assessments do not test the same grade levels:
 - EGRA tests P4 students on P2-/P3-level reading skills.
 - LARS tests P4 students on the P3 curriculum.
 - FARS tests P3 students (as well as P2 and P1 students) on skills appropriate to their grade level and aligned to the curriculum.
4. The LARS is a norm-referenced test, while EGRA and FARS are criterion-referenced tests.

Probably because of the substantive differences among the three tests, as shown in Table 6, the findings are not consistent. They do show, however, that Rwanda has not yet met its 100% literacy goal in the early grades (this is also the case in all countries where tests like EGRA and FARS are used to measure reading performance). The assessments show that Rwandan students in the early grades are learning to read, but on average, they are progressing slowly toward the goal of Vision 2020. Though data from the three assessments suggest room for improvement in students’ reading performance, the outlook for improvement is positive. Data from follow-on and smaller-scale studies provide some evidence of the effectiveness of particular interventions in Rwanda in improving student performance in both fluency and comprehension, as discussed in the following section.

Table 6. Comparison of EGRA, LARS and FARS

Assessment	Comparison point (meeting expectations)	% of students above comparison point	% of students below comparison point
EGRA	31 words per minute	39	61
LARS	43 correct answers	63	37
FARS	33 words correct p/min	24	76

2. Is Reading Instruction Improving?

The previous section answers the question of whether students in Rwanda are learning to read. This section answers the question of *how* they are learning; specifically, have new instructional programs introduced since 2011 affected students’ acquisition of literacy skills. The two significant programs are Literacy, Language and Learning (L3) and Literacy Boost. Both have changed the way literacy is taught in the early grades by introducing new learning and teaching materials and training teachers how to use the materials.

Evidence that students’ early-grade reading skills are improving as a result of the L3 intervention comes from the midline administration of the FARS in 2015. This nationwide assessment was designed to measure changes in reading skills after teachers and students had used the

instructional materials developed by L3 for one year.¹⁸ Evidence of improvements in reading also comes from two assessments of these two programs, each conducted in one district rather than administered nationwide. EDC piloted the L3 materials in Bugesera district and conducted pre- and post-tests with students using the materials. Save the Children assessed students who were participating in its Literacy Boost program in Gicumbi district.

2015 FARS Midline Assessment

The **FARS Midline Assessment** was administered in September 2015, one year after the baseline assessment. The FARS Midline Assessment tested 2,580 learners in 60 schools.

Table 7 shows that at each grade level, P1, P2, and P3, students' average **fluency** rate improved. All changes are statistically significant at $p < .001$ level.

Table 7. Changes over time in average number of wcpm

	wcpm on FARS Baseline Assessment (2014)	wcpm on FARS Midline Assessment (2015)
P1	4.8	7.5
P2	19.2	21.5
P3	22.1	25.1

In number of words read correctly per minute, P1 and P3 learners showed the most gains. Gains from baseline to midline for all three grade levels are as follows:

- P1 showed an average gain of 2.7 wcpm (± 1.1 wcpm).
- P2 showed an average gain of 2.3 wcpm (± 2.0 wcpm).
- P3 showed average gains of 3.0 wcpm (± 1.8 wcpm).

Yet many students still do not meet the 2012 standards for fluency.

- In **P3**, 24% of the students were at or above the P3 standard for wcpm proficiency (for the end of the P3 year), which is 33 words read correctly in one minute, as reflected in the REB standard adopted in 2013 (Table 8).

Table 8. Changes over time in % of P3 scores at each level of proficiency

wcpm	% below P3 proficiency level			% at or above P3 proficiency level		Total (%)
	0	1–19	20–32	33–47	47+	
2014 Baseline	21	17	37	18	6	100
2015 Midline	19	11	39	26	5	100

- In **P2**, 56% of the students were at or above the P2 end-of-year standard for proficiency, which is 20 words read correctly in one minute, according to REB standards adopted in 2015¹⁹ (Table 9).

¹⁸ The MINEDUC also collected a second round of data in October 2014 using the LARS, but the data have not yet been publicly reported.

¹⁹ While there were no agreed-upon P2 oral reading fluency standards at the time of the Baseline FARS, P2 standards were approved by the REB in August 2015 based on the baseline assessment findings.

Table 9. Changes overtime in % of P2 scores at each level of proficiency

	% below P2 proficiency level		% at or above P2 proficiency level			Total
	0	1–19	20–32	33–47	47+	
wcpm	0	1–19	20–32	33–47	47+	
2014 Baseline	33	17	25	20	5	100
2015 Midline	26	18	27	22	7	100

- In **P1**, 50% of the sample was at or above the P1 proficiency level. Since no fluency standards have been adopted for P1, non-zero scores were used as a measure of fluency (non-zero scores at the end of P1 are a positive result). The percent of P1 learners with non-zero scores increased by 10%. In addition, the percent of P1 learners who could read 20 words correct per minute or faster more than doubled between the baseline and the midline (Table 10).

Table 10. Changes over time in % of P1 scores at each level of proficiency

	% below P1 proficiency level	% at or above P1 proficiency level				Total
	0	1–19	20–32	33–47	47+	
wcpm	0	1–19	20–32	33–47	47+	
2014 Baseline	60	34	5	1	0	100
2015 Midline	50	37	11	2	0	100

Changes in **comprehension** results between the 2014 baseline and 2015 midline assessments were not as impressive as the fluency results, and the comparison suffers from uneven differences in the difficulty of the text and complexity of the questions, particularly in the P2 test. While there were slight gains at P1 and P3, they were not statistically significant.

Nevertheless, the results of the 2015 FARS Midline Assessment present strong evidence that early-grade reading performance improved significantly in the year between September 2014 and September 2015. The effect size in wcpm (the magnitude of the difference between the baseline and midline) is large at P1 (0.29 [\pm .12]), medium at P3 (0.19 [\pm .11]), and medium at P2 (0.13 [\pm .11]).²⁰

The FARS Midline Assessment also included a baseline for P4 in Kinyarwanda and English. P4 students read an average of 40.6 wcpm in Kinyarwanda and 26.2 wcpm in English. These scores will be compared with the endline assessment to be given to all four grades in 2016.

²⁰ In education research, an effect size of $d > .2$ is considered moderate, and over .5 is considered substantial. (Reference: Cohen, J. (1988). *Statistical power analysis for the behavioral sciences* (2nd ed.). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Earlbaum Associates.). Effect size is a statistical measure that is used to estimate the magnitude of difference between two measures. It is computed by dividing the differences between the means of the two groups by the pooled standard deviation. Vernez, G. and R. Zimmer (2007) *Interpreting the effects of title in supplemental educational services*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND. Vernez and Zimmer suggest the following interpretation of effect sizes in education: 0.25 or more as large, 0.10-0.25 as medium, and 0.05 to 0.10 as small.

2013 District-Focused Assessments of Literacy Interventions

Altogether, results from the FARS Midline Assessment show that while early-grade students' performance in literacy has improved on average across the nation since 2011, there is room for even more improvement.

Two smaller quasi-experimental studies were designed to show attribution to particular interventions and to demonstrate that explicit instruction in reading skills could make a difference. The assessment of the Literacy Boost Rwanda program in Gicumbi and the L3 pilot in Bugesera both showed positive results. Not only did reading skills improve but improvements were due to the enrichment of the early grades language curricula with decoding skills that helped students improve their reading fluency.

Literacy Boost Rwanda

Literacy Boost Rwanda is an intervention implemented by Save the Children in Gicumbi district in the Northern Province. A randomized control trial (RCT) was implemented in that district to measure the impact of Literacy Boost's activities on students' reading skills. The intervention had two sets of activities:

1. Teacher training in Literacy Boost
2. A combination of teacher training with home and community support for children's reading development

The test given to students covered fluency and comprehension as well as oral language skills, alphabet knowledge, individual word reading, and writing—all literacy-related skills emphasized in the Literacy Boost program.

The RCT was implemented across all 21 sectors in Gicumbi district,²¹ with a baseline reading assessment and accompanying survey administered in September-October 2013.²² At baseline, a total of 85 schools were randomly selected from a pool of 102 schools in Gicumbi district. P1 students who had been randomly selected for assessment at baseline in 2013 were found and tested again at midline (now in P3). Midline data were collected in February-March of 2015.²³

The midline assessment of Literacy Boost Rwanda found that students who participated in the program's activities—those who both had teachers trained in Literacy Boost and participated in community activities—performed significantly better on the P2-P3 fluency assessment than students in the control group. They also performed better (though not significantly better) on nearly every other reading skill assessed. However, due to revisions in the implementation schedule for community activities, the midline assessment faced some methodological problems, and student performance was not precisely estimated (meaning the standard errors were quite large) due to a smaller than planned sample size.²⁴

²¹ All of the sectors in the Literacy Boost sample were also reached by the L3 project. Without the presence of the L3 intervention in these schools, the isolated effect of Literacy Boost might have been larger.

²² Friedlander, E., Gasana, J., & Goldenberg, C. (2014, April). *Save the Children Literacy Boost Rwanda: Reading assessment report* (p. 1).

²³ Friedlander, E., Gasana, J., Malik, S., Zhou, S., Baker, R., & Goldenberg, C. (2015, June). *Literacy Boost Rwanda: Midline reading assessment report* (p. 1).

²⁴ Ibid. 21.

Endline data were collected between August and December 2015. The final analysis had not been completed as of April 2016, but preliminary analyses suggest significant and positive impact of Literacy Boost on student performance.²⁵

Literacy, Language, and Learning

The Literacy, Language and Learning (L3) pilot,²⁶ which took place in Bugesera district, was an evaluation of the impact of the L3 intervention as a small-scale pilot before it was launched nationwide to provide evidence of the intervention's effectiveness. Students were tested using standardized assessments in literacy in Kinyarwanda and English (and in numeracy). Unlike the national L3 test (the FARS), which focused solely on fluency and comprehension, the pilot assessment covered a broad range of literacy skills, including the following:

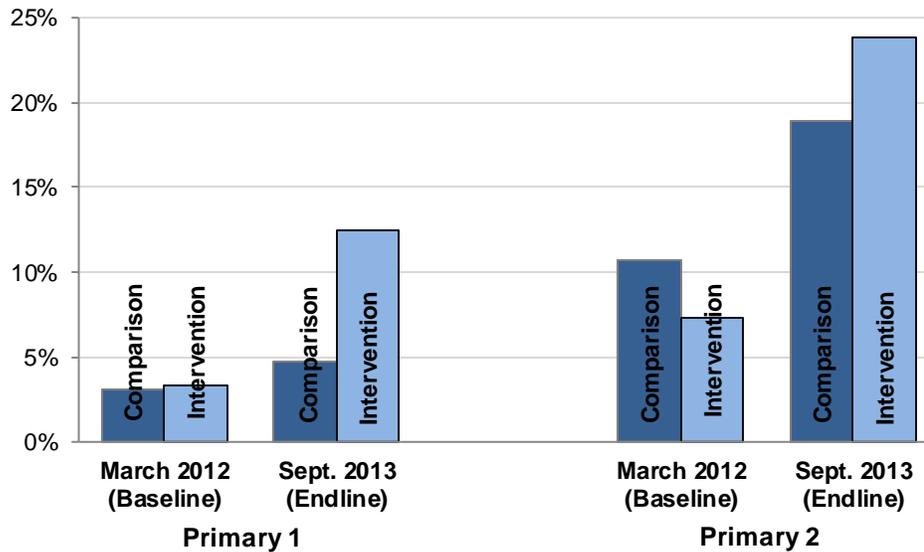
- Vocabulary
- Alphabet recitation
- Letter reading
- Letter-sound association and blends
- Counting syllables
- Concepts of print
- Word reading
- Listening comprehension
- Oral fluency

The study employed a cross-sectional experimental design, testing students at the baseline and the endline. Students were randomly selected from P1- and P2-grade classrooms in 12 schools (6 intervention and 6 control schools). The baseline assessment was conducted in March of 2012 and included 654 students. The endline assessment was conducted in September-October of 2013 and included 662 students.

- **Kinyarwanda.** As depicted in Figure 1, the assessment of the L3 pilot found that P1 and P2 students' Kinyarwanda overall reading skills (all of the subtests combined) improved significantly as a result of the L3 pilot program. Endline scores revealed significant differences between the L3 and comparison group students, with L3 students outperforming comparison group students in overall reading skills.

²⁵ Attribution of the source of that change is difficult from the FARS design, however, as sampled students may have been exposed to a range of interventions.

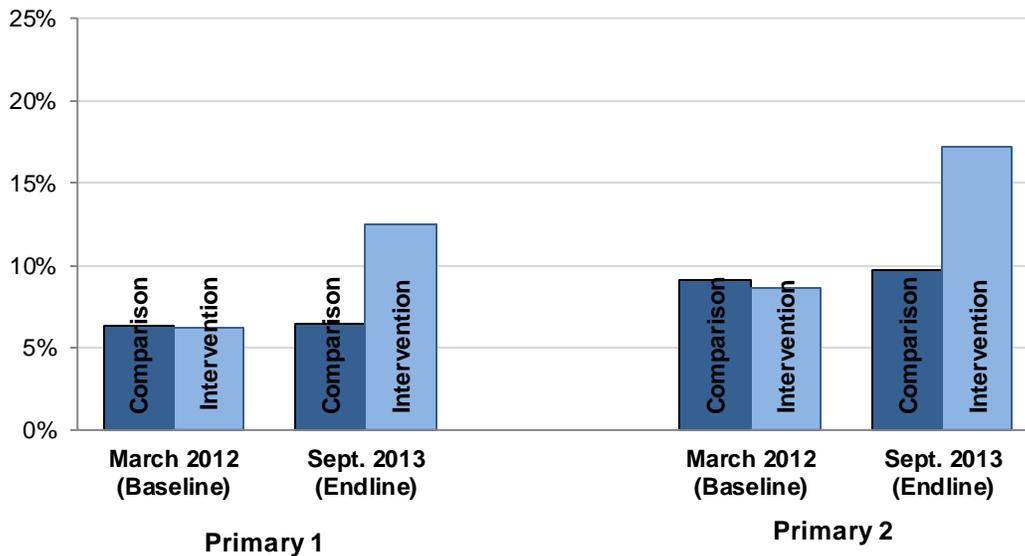
²⁶ Education Development Center. (2014, January). *Literacy, Language and Learning (L3) Initiative Bugesera pilot student assessment report*. Washington, DC: Education Development Center.

Figure 1. L3 pilot results in P1-P2 Kinyarawanda²⁷

The two study groups in P1 were equivalent at the baseline on all subtests, and the intervention group did better than the comparison group at the endline on all but one subtest (at $p < .001$ level). The two study groups in P2 were equivalent at baseline in 3 of 12 subtests, and in the remaining 9 subtests the comparison group students scored higher at the baseline than the intervention group students. At the endline, however, the P2 intervention group scored statistically significantly higher than the P2 comparison group in seven subtests.

- English.** Sampled P1 and P2 students were tested in English literacy skills, using an adapted Early-Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA). As Figure 2 illustrates, the overall level of English reading proficiency was quite low. Both P1 and P2 students from intervention schools demonstrated some gains between the baseline and endline assessments, while the scores of the comparison group students remained flat.

²⁷ Ibid., 13 (Figure 4).

Figure 2. Overall Scores on English Literacy Assessment, by Grade²⁸

While the two study groups in P1 were equivalent at the baseline on all but one subtest, the intervention group did better at the endline than the comparison group on all subtests. Similarly, in P2, while the two study groups were equivalent at the baseline in all but 2 (basic conversation vocabulary and alphabet recitation) of the 10 subtests, at the endline, the intervention group scored statistically significantly higher than the comparison group on 7 subtests.

Summary of Findings – Is Reading Instruction Improving?

- Like the FARS, the Literacy Boost Gicumbi study assessment and the assessment of the L3 program in Bugesera showed improvements in students' reading skills over time.
- The Literacy Boost research and L3 pilot study demonstrate that improvements in students' fluency and comprehension in reading can be attributed to particular types of interventions because the interventions were rigorously evaluated, using both time-series and comparison groups.
- Thus, it can be concluded that current early-grade reading interventions in Rwanda are making an impact on rates of student performance in literacy.

3. Which Children Are Learning to Read? What Conditions Make a Difference?

The assessments discussed in the previous sections show that while many students are learning to read, some are showing only weak (if any) evidence of improvement. Are these differences related to individual characteristics or conditions in which they are learning to read? Four of the assessment studies conducted between 2011 and 2015 (the EGRA, the LARS, the FARS, and the baseline assessment of Literacy Boost) not only enquired into students' performance but also

²⁸ Ibid., 30 (Figure 23).

looked at relationships between the performance of students, their gender and age, and the conditions, or contextual factors, under which they were learning to read.

Findings from Assessments on Contextual Factors

These four studies provide some evidence of which children do well on literacy tests and which do not, and what the context and circumstances for their performance are. The studies differ widely, however, in some ways:

- While three are national samples, the Literacy Boost assessment was limited to Gicumbi district.
- Different variables and different variable composites were used. Socioeconomic status (SES), for example, was defined by particular proxies and composites of proxies, which varied widely among the assessments.²⁹
- Methods of data collection on context were different, varying among observations of classrooms and schools, questionnaires, and interviews.
- Methods of data analysis were different. Some reports used regression analysis and/or other statistical procedures; some did not describe their data analysis methods.
- Methods of data reporting and display varied considerably.
- Each of the assessments looked at grade levels between P1 and P4, but not at the same grades.
- The years in which data were collected ranged from 2011 (two assessments) to 2015, and the report on each assessment was issued the year following that in which data were collected.

Nevertheless, it is clear across these assessments that the home and school contexts in which students learn to read and write, as well as their SES, are highly likely to influence their performance.

Table 11 summarizes the relationships between students’ literacy performance and contextual variables as reported in the four assessments. The table lists the contextual factors that were found to be important in determining which children learned and shows which assessment used the factor as an item in data collection. The green bars indicate that the assessment found a statistically significant relationship between student performance and the contextual factor. The yellow bars indicate that the report did not say whether or not the relationship was significant. A discussion of the various relationships follows the table.

Table 11. Relationships between students’ literacy performance and contextual variables

	LARS 2012	EGRA 2012	LB 2014	FARS 2016	Notes on correlation
Age relative to grade level				★	Negative
Sex			★		Girls do better
Repeater				★	Negative

²⁹ Most of the assessments that listed significant factors did not list the factors for which they found no relationship. Some exceptions are noted here.

More frequently absent		✓		★	Negative
<u>Classroom and teacher</u>					
Teacher's years of experience	★				Negative
Teacher has professional qualifications		✓			Positive
Teacher writes comments in notebook		✓			Positive
Student can choose which stories to read				★	Positive
<u>School environment</u>					
Teachers are more frequently absent				★	Negative
Student feels safe at school		✓			Positive
Electricity and/or tap water		✓			Positive
The school received books on time		✓			Positive
School has storeroom, with books used		✓			Positive
School makes use of learning materials		✓			Positive
School's distance to district office				★	Positive
<u>Home environment</u>					
Average parental age	★				Positive
<u>Home literacy environment</u>					
			★ Composite score		Positive
Reading materials at home		✓			Positive
Other family members can read		✓		★	Positive
Others read stories aloud at home				★	Positive
Parents check homework				★	Positive
<u>SES</u>					
			★ Composite score		Positive
Electricity, piped water, and/or TV		✓			Positive
Student had something to eat or drink the morning of the test				★	Positive
Home has radio or cell phone				★	Positive
Home has bike, motorbike, or car				★	Positive
Average parental income	★				Positive

Key

- ★ Statistically significant relationship
- ✓ Relationship reported but not defined

Table 11 shows, above all, that classroom, school, and home environments, as well as SES, all matter in who learns to read. Individual characteristics and classroom, school, and home environments make a difference.

- Measures of individual characteristics showed that older children were not learning as much as children who were of the appropriate age for their grade level (e.g., children who were 8 years old were of the appropriate age for P2; statistically speaking, they learned more than children in P2 who were 9 years or older).³⁰ Other findings include the following:
 - In Gicumbi, the Literacy Boost assessment found that girls learned more than boys.
 - FARS found that repeaters learned less than non-repeaters.
 - Both EGRA and FARS found that students who were absent more frequently learned less than those with good attendance.
- In terms of the classroom context, younger (though more qualified) teachers and those who wrote comments in students' notebooks (P3) offered a better environment for learning, as did opportunities for students to choose the books they read.
- Schools with better facilities and that took better care of books had students who demonstrated more learning. FARS found teacher absenteeism to be negatively associated with learner performance. FARS also found that "contrary to expectations, such factors as overcrowding (teacher to learner ratio), availability of a school or a community library, school size, and the nursery attached to school were not found to be associated with learner results."³¹ The schools' distance to the district office did correlate with teachers' attendance and, in turn, student performance; shorter distances were positively related to student performance.
- The Literacy Boost assessment created a composite index for Home Literacy Environment (HLE) and found significant relationships between HLE and reading skills (letters, dictation, decoding, comprehension, etc.). For example, students with low HLE scored 8% on decoding skill while those with high HLE scored 18%. Other assessments also found correlations between the home environment and literacy skills. Homes where there were books and other family members who read and where parents read aloud and checked homework were likely to raise students' reading scores. Older parents also seemed to advantage young readers.
- To account for SES, the four assessments used different proxies, but those reported here made a difference (again, there were unreported proxies for SES that did not make a difference statistically). The Literacy Boost assessment created a composite index for SES and, again, found significant relationships between SES and reading skills. For example, students with low socioeconomic status (SES) scored 1% on reading accuracy while those with high SES scored 12%.

³⁰ The FARS, which reported this finding, found it to be true only in P2, P3, and P4. In P1, older children did better than 7-year-olds.

³¹ Education Development Center. (2014, November). *USAID/L3: National fluency and mathematics assessment baseline report*. 75.

Findings on Differences among Districts

The LARS in 2011 presented the distribution of average grade 3 literacy scores by district compared to Rwanda's average of 49.3%. The averages ranged from 62% in Gicumbi to 36.1% in Nyaruguru.

- The three districts with the highest scores were Gicumbi (62%), Kicukiro (60.9%) and Bugesera (58.8%).
- The three districts with the lowest scores were Nyaruguru (36.1%), Kirehe (38.7%), and Gisagara (39.3%).

This distribution shows that, in 2011, the district in which a student lived mattered to a student's literacy performance.³² The 2015 FARS Midline Assessment data showed that these differences had narrowed.

Summary of Findings – Which Children Are Learning to Read?

Data show that students in the early primary grades in Rwanda do not have equal opportunities to learn to read. Their chance of performing well depends upon their gender and age, their schools and teachers, their families' reading habits, and the resources available to their families. Poverty is a major barrier to reading. When children are not in school, they are doing chores or sleeping. There is no time left for reading and often no light for reading after dark.

Such differences cannot be overlooked. The ESSP calls for *all* students to complete their primary education, which means that *all* children must learn to read. Questions that should be addressed:

- What needs to be continued?
- What needs to be changed to maintain and even accelerate the overall rate of improvement and to address the differential outcomes in performance?
- What forces accelerate and inhibit progress toward making early literacy skills accessible to all?

The next sections of this report look at the policies and strategies, institutional environment, and culture of reading that influence literacy outcomes.

³² REB, LARS, 74.

4. The Policy Framework

While those responsible for literacy instruction must have confidence in the instructional programs teachers are using to teach reading, additional forces strongly influence literacy performance. This section and the following two sections discuss these forces (Figure 3):

Section 4: The policies and strategies in the basic education sector

Section 5: The institutional environment

Section 6: The cultural environment of learning to read (learners' families and communities)

Figure 3. The political, institutional, and cultural environments of literacy



Literacy's Place in the Education Strategic Framework

The overarching education strategic and policy framework is documented in the Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP) 2013–18, which lays out a clear and comprehensive set of education outcomes. These outcomes are derived from Rwanda's key strategy documents:

- Vision 2020
- The Nine-Year Basic Education Strategy (2008)
- The Seven-Year Government Program (2012)
- The Economic Development and Poverty Reduction Strategy (EDPRS2) of 2013–2018³³

Education Sector Strategic Plan

The ESSP is a balanced approach to all aspects of education in Rwanda, including early-grade literacy. The ESSP states that “at primary level, a continued focus will be placed on the acquisition of basic numeracy and literacy skills in the early grades.”³⁴ It also includes one paragraph of discussion of priorities for improving literacy:

Improving reading levels will require concentrated efforts on a variety of fronts. This includes ensuring that current and preservice teachers are trained in effective reading classroom practices and provided with evidence-based reading instructional materials, that primary school timetables allocate a minimal amount of time each week to both the teaching of reading and to personal reading, that students across the grade levels have sufficient access to high-quality and engaging recreational or supplementary reading materials, and that schools and

³³ These four documents are summarized in the ESSP and also discussed in detail in Honeyman, C. (2014). *Early literacy promotion in Rwanda: Opportunities and obstacles* (pp 22–29). Kigali, RW: Save the Children.

³⁴ Education Sector Strategic Plan 2013/14 to 2017/18, 37.

communities institute campaigns to raise awareness of the importance of reading and to develop students' interest in reading. The learning and teaching material system for the procurement and distribution of textbooks, readers and supplementary learning materials and teaching aids will be fully operational, and will result in continued improvements in the student/textbook ratio as well as access to reading material for all schoolchildren.³⁵

These statements about literacy are grounded in broader strategies for improving the quality of education, particularly basic education (grades 1–12).³⁶ The ESSP's three strategic **goals** (access, quality, and relevance) are elaborated in 10 sector **outcomes**. Of these 10, 6 outcomes are directly relevant to basic education (Table 12). Literacy is included as an indicator of the outcome on transition to secondary: “percent of students meeting minimum standards in English (E), Kinyarwanda (K) and math (M) in P3, P5 and S2”³⁷ (See Table 12).

Mid Term Review of the ESSP

The Mid Term Review of the ESSP³⁸ translates the 10 outcomes into a matrix of **indicators**. The indicators are organized into three layers to make reporting and evaluation manageable.³⁹ Table 12 is an extraction of the indicators that have a bearing on literacy. Layer 2 in the table is particularly instructive because it has indicators that reveal the strategies used to reach the goals expressed in Layer 1 indicators. (In some cases—such as textbooks and disabled students—these strategies appear in Layer 3.)

Table 12. ESSP Indicators reorganized by the Mid Term Review⁴⁰

Layer 1	Layer 2	Layer 3
Primary pupil to qualified teacher ratio	Primary pupils: classroom ratio (level 2)	Primary teacher attrition rate
	Pupils per class	
	% of teachers meeting the independent level (B1 and above) of English proficiency	
	% of head teachers and school managers trained annually	% of primary schools with access to alternative energy sources or water
GER in pre-primary	NER in pre-primary	New ECD center
		% of pre-primary teachers and care givers trained
	% of sectors with school-readiness programs	% of primary schools with a pre-primary section

³⁵ Ibid., 54.

³⁶ Though basic education covers grades 1–12, this report is focused on early primary education, grades 1–4.

³⁷ Education Sector Strategic Plan 2013/14 to 2017/18, 49.

³⁸ Education Sector Strategic Plan 2013/14 to 2017/18, Mid Term Review Draft 2, January 27, 2016.

³⁹ Education Sector Strategic Plan Mid Term Review Draft Monitoring and Evaluation Framework, Annex A. Sector Monitoring Matrix, 27 January 2016.

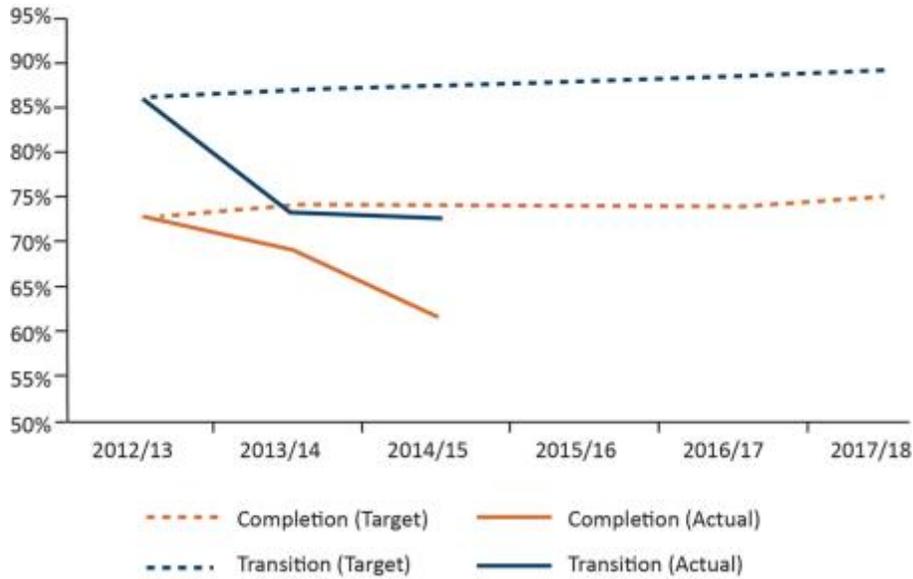
⁴⁰ Indicators most relevant to literacy are in bold.

		% of pre-primary teachers and care givers trained
Transition rate from primary to lower secondary	% of students meeting minimum standards in English (E), Kinyarwanda (K), and math (M) in P3, P5, and S2	
		Primary pupil to textbook ratio
Primary completion rate	Primary repetition rate	
	Primary dropout rate	
	% of head teachers and school managers trained annually	% of primary schools with Internet connectivity
		% of primary schools with required science facilities (science kits/ corners)
Number of children with disabilities enrolled in school (primary and secondary)		% of school with disability-friendly facilities for children with special needs
		Total number of teachers who have received in-service training on teaching students with special educational needs (and as a proportion)
Improved administration and management	% of primary schools with functional PTA	Total number of PTAs
		% of primary schools with Parent Teacher Committee member trained in school management

Primary school completion rates. Of particular concern in the Mid Term Review is the growing gap between targeted and actual primary completion rates and between targeted and actual transition rates to secondary.⁴¹ However, these gaps will be difficult to narrow without increased improvement rates in literacy performance across Rwanda. Figure 4 from the ESSP Mid Term Review depicts the gap between targeted and actual rates of primary completion and transition to secondary.

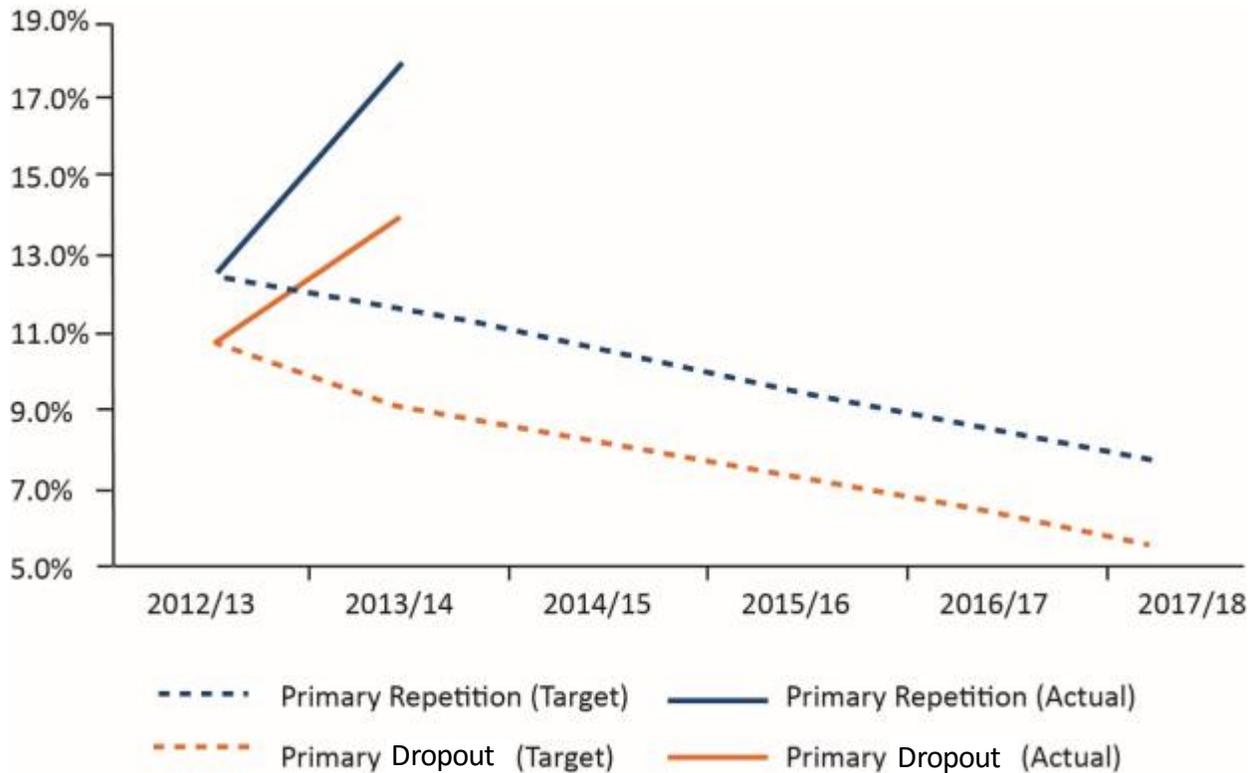
⁴¹ The completion rate is defined as “the number of new entrants in last year of primary school in a given year, expressed as a percentage of the total number of population having official age for being in the last year of primary school.” The transition rate is “the number of new entrants in [P6] as a percentage of the pupils who were enrolled in [P5] in the previous year.” ESSP Mid Term Review Draft 2, January 27, 2016, 14.

Figure 4. Gap between targets and actual rates of primary completion and transition to secondary⁴²



These rates are attributed in the Review in part to high rates of repetition and dropout, which also show an increasing divergence from the targets (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Gap between targets and actual rates of repeaters and dropouts⁴³



⁴² ESSP Mid Term Review, Draft 2, 14.

⁴³ ESSP Mid Term Review, Draft 2, 15.

The Education Management Information System data show “that repetition is a particularly likely outcome for those enrolled in early grades, when students are being taught in Kinyarwanda rather than English. This suggests some children are never advancing beyond P1 and 2 at all. It is also possible some teachers are holding children back in early grades to give them more time to learn before progressing to P4 and English medium instruction.”⁴⁴

The Review goes on to suggest that the barriers to primary completion relate more to improved instruction and increased learning than to “inputs:”

Understanding the reasons why children are not yet learning well enough and privileging strategies to tackle these barriers is critical to ensuring the primary completion rate improves and meets the target of 74% of all children in the official P6 cohort. It will also be important to articulate these strategies effectively at district and school, as well as central policy level, to avoid a situation where investment continues to focus on inputs to the system, rather than on what and how children learn.⁴⁵

Even though the reference to literacy is not stated explicitly, it is surely implied, since low rates of achievement in Kinyarwanda and English language skills are clearly among the barriers to primary completion and transition to secondary.

Progress toward ESSP outcomes. The Mid Term Review on the ESSP provides a table of results for Year 2014/15 and targets for that year and future years in the ESSP.⁴⁶ Table 13 summarizes these results and targets for the indicators discussed above that are relevant to literacy.

Table 13. ESSP outcomes, indicators, targets and results

ESSP Outcome	Indicator	2014/15 Result	2014/15 Target	2015/16 Target	2017/18 Target	Status
Qualified, suitably skilled, and motivated teachers and teachers to meet demands of expanding education access	Pupil-to-qualified teacher ratio (primary)	61:1	55:1	52:1	48:1	Significantly off track
Improved access to school-readiness programs by 2017/18 accompanied by expanded access to 3 years of early learning for 4- to 6-year-olds	Percentage of children enrolled in pre-primary education programs (GER)	17.5%	19.8%	23.8%	28.0%	Slightly off track
Increased equitable access to 9 years of basic education for all children and expanding access to 12 years of basic education	Transition from primary to lower secondary	72.6%	87.3%	87.9%	89.0%	Significantly off track
	Primary completion rate	61.3%	74.0%	74.0%	75.0%	Significantly off track
Increased equitable access to	Number of	25,770	31,517	36,485	(final	Significantly

⁴⁴ ESSP Mid Term Review, Draft 2, 16.

⁴⁵ ESSP Mid Term Review, Draft 2, 16.

⁴⁶ ESSP Mid Term Review, Draft 2, 12.

education for students with special educational needs within mainstream and special schools	children with disabilities enrolled in schools (primary and secondary)				target not in ESSP or EDPRS2)	off track
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The targets are not being met: The pupil to qualified teacher ratio is about 10% under target; the transition to secondary rate is 14.7% under target; and the primary completion rate is about 12.7% under target. This gap between targets and achievements in the first two outcomes (more teachers and pre-primary programs) bear directly on literacy instruction, since these are a critical part of the strategy for improving literacy instruction. The indicators for the third outcome (transition to secondary and primary completion rate) reflect, among other factors, the rates of improvement in literacy performance.

The Joint Review of the Education Sector (JRES). The government uses the JRES to review progress toward the policy goals in the ESSP, as described in the Mid Term Review, and quantitative targets set in each JRES. These meetings, which happen twice annually (one to review mid-term progress and one to plan for the following year), are forums for sector-wide discussion of proposed action plans and budgets. The meetings are open to all stakeholders in education, including nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), teachers, and others.⁴⁷ Officials report on progress of the previous year and plans for the coming year. In the June 2015 JRES, policy studies were selected to support progress toward objectives, and the 2015–16 budget was presented and discussed. Highlights of the 2015 presentation were budget shortfalls of (i) over half of what is required for training teachers in the new curriculum and (ii) close to half of what is required for new textbooks and supplementary learning materials.⁴⁸ While the year 2016 is an exception due to the curriculum revision, these shortfalls and the overall insufficiency of the education budget to meet policy objectives have strong implications for improving literacy instruction.

Recommendations in the Mid Term Review

The Mid Term Review strongly emphasizes the importance of basic skills taught in primary school to Rwanda's strategic development policy. For example:

A good grounding in the basics of primary-level learning is a prerequisite to progressing further in education, whether in general or TVET streams... *Tackling primary completion rates* is therefore critical to fulfilling the Government of Rwanda's Vision 2020, specifically in the area of building skilled human capital, which in turn drives the country's ability to meet other strategic goals, such as a vibrant private sector.⁴⁹

In the framework of the ESSP strategic outcomes, the review makes the following seven recommendations (among others) that either directly relate to primary education or encompass primary education (pp. 47–57):

1. Invest in early childhood education (ECE) to reduce repetition rates in grades 1 and 2.

Because of a funding gap of 59% for pre-primary education,⁵⁰ the immediate aim of ECE

⁴⁷ See Honeyman, *Early Literacy Promotion*, 44, for a broader picture of the JRES in civil society.

⁴⁸ MINEDUC. (2015, June 15). Forward-looking joint review of the education sector report (p. 13).

⁴⁹ ESSP Mid Term Review, Draft 2, 18.

⁵⁰ PowerPoint presentation on 2015/16 Planned Activities and Draft Budget, slide 7.

should be to reduce high repetition rates, in P1 in particular, by improving levels of school readiness. This would mean a focus on reaching children in the 5–6-year-old age group, with the aim of providing one year of high-quality ECE learning in the period immediately before they enroll in primary education.

2. **Invest in developing teachers' English to reduce repetition and dropout, and build value achieved on other investments.** With the exception of P1–P3, most of the teaching and learning materials for the new curriculum is in English. This requires that teachers be able to work effectively in English. Yet Rwanda adopted English as a language of instruction only in 2008, and many teachers are still more comfortable teaching in French. A recent study by the British Council (BC) shows that teachers have benefited from an English language training program, raising the portion of teachers who meet a B1 standard to nearly 50%. But the BC argues that this standard is really too low. The Mid Term Review concludes that “transforming teachers' English language skills will therefore require high levels of investment in training and individual practice, for teachers themselves as well as for REB and development partners providing professional development support to the education sector.” The JRES in June 2015 reported a budget gap of over half what was required for training teachers in English.⁵¹
3. **Use the investment in English language training plus the rollout of the new curriculum to embed literacy as a focus for primary school teachers across all subjects.** All teachers would learn in their preservice course how to help students at every grade level and in every subject improve their reading and writing skills. A variety of in-service interventions would help teachers do this, as well.
4. **Develop and launch a program aimed at minor disabilities to improve access while also tackling repetition and dropout.** There is a wide diversity of types of special needs, and the solutions that must be provided to help children learn. The Mid Term Review recommends prioritizing a manageable number of interventions in the short term, including a program of eye care and hearing tests for children entering school.
5. **Build head teachers' capacity to lead schools, pedagogically and administratively.** This recommendation is in line with the Teacher Development and Management (TDM) policy. The Mid Term Review states that “officials at REB note that this support is critical for a group which typically has little experience either of teaching or management, given the fast track promotion of young members of the teaching cadre.”⁵²
6. **Support district administrators' capacity to plan and manage the local school system more effectively.** “Responsibility for creating conditions for schools to flourish and children to learn effectively is ...heavily weighted toward district administrators, over whom MINEDUC and REB have limited influence.” Yet the MINEDUC has “a clear responsibility to ensure communication of policy ...and provide relevant support to officials at district and sector levels in its implementation.” DEOs “appreciate the need to ensure that data gathered at school level is... of high quality.”⁵³ But they understand less well the critical link between ESSP indicators, the JRES, EDPRS2, and the provision of financial and other

⁵¹ PowerPoint presentation on 2015/16 Planned Activities and Draft Budget, slide 9.

⁵² ESSP Mid Term Review, Draft 2, 55

⁵³ ESSP Mid Term Review, Draft 2, 55–56

resources to the education sector. They need this understanding to make a compelling case at the district level for funding for education. The Mid Term Review recommends that the REB and its partners “develop a set of proposals for working more closely in the future with DDEs for discussion and agreement with MINALOC and district representatives.”

- 7. Focus information and communications technology (ICT) for pedagogy around the implementation of the competence-based curriculum.** ICT policy is part of the Learning and Teaching Materials Policy. The Mid Term Review takes issue with the ESSP’s policy on One Laptop Per Child and other policy goals that are unrealistic given the connectivity and resources of many schools. It gives priority to the use of ICT for management purposes.

While they provide an overall framework for continued progress toward Vision 2020, the strategic recommendations in the ESSP and the Mid Term Review of the ESSP do not lay out the details of a comprehensive set of policies and plans that will affect literacy performance. Such policies and plans are the responsibility of the MINEDUC, particularly the REB and the Directorate of Education Planning, as discussed below.

Policies with Implications for Literacy

The MINEDUC does not have a policy on early-grade literacy that targets literacy as a foundation of learning for *all* Rwandans; the only existing literacy policy, written in 2008 and recently updated, focusses on the promotion of adult literacy. To address this gap, MINEDUC is drafting a literacy promotion policy that is inclusive of all ages, from engaging parents in children’s early cognitive development through literacy programs for adults. The policy is expected to be available in time for consideration for inclusion in the Education Sector Policy, which is currently under revision.

Even with a literacy promotion policy in place, however, literacy instruction will continue to be strongly influenced by other basic education policies. Five of these that are key to improving literacy have been revised or newly drafted in the past few years:

1. Curriculum and assessment
2. Language in education
3. Teacher development and management
4. Learning and teaching materials
5. Early childhood development

The MINEDUC’s Director General for Planning is responsible for coordinating the meetings of the education strategy groups. The real work in policy development related to literacy is done within the Basic Education Strategy Group by some of the technical working groups and their task forces. These groups and task forces bring together ministry officials and donor partner and NGO representatives to explore and address issues and present their recommendations. In early 2016, the policy papers listed above were either in draft form or had been approved by MINEDUC and ready for presentation to the cabinet.

The policy papers follow a common format that includes:

- An outline of the vision, mission, and objectives of the proposed policy
- Policy statements that address needs and issues in terms of goals and strategies
- An implementation framework and plan for actions
- Budgetary needs

- Recommendations for monitoring and evaluating the policy’s implementation

Following is an examination of the particular features of each of these policy papers that have important implications for early-grade literacy.

Curriculum and Assessment Policy

The policy document that will have the most impact on improving literacy is probably the new **competence-based curriculum**,⁵⁴ first publicized in the ESSP (although the ESSP emphasizes competence-based programs in technical and vocational education and training [TVET], not primary education). In teaching language, the new curriculum converges the MINEDUC’s policy on curriculum and instructional methods with the international best practices that have been supported in Rwanda for at least five years by international organizations. In primary education, the new curriculum inserts into the language subjects (Kinyarwanda and English) specific instruction in reading skills, including decoding and other skills that improve oral fluency and comprehension—skills demonstrated by L3 and Literacy Boost to improve reading performance and introduced into mainstream Rwandan instruction. With the introduction of the competence-based curriculum, the English and Kinyarwanda materials supported by L3 have been aligned with the competence-based curriculum and approved by the Textbook Approval Committee of the REB. The materials, which include textbooks, teacher’s guides, and read aloud books, are now in all primary schools.

The new curriculum has been developed in tandem with the **Curriculum and Assessment Policy**,⁵⁵ which states the principles of curriculum development (restated in the curriculum framework), lays out curriculum objectives (summarized in the framework), and outlines strategies for each objective. It is important to note that literacy is only one of eight sets of competences in the policy and the framework. In those documents, literacy is given no more or less priority than the other competences (i.e., numeracy, ICT, citizenship and national identity, entrepreneurship and business development, science and technology, and communication in the official languages).

⁵⁴ Rwanda Education Board. (2015). *Competence-based curriculum for basic education*.

⁵⁵ Republic of Rwanda, Ministry of Education, Rwanda Education Board, Curriculum & Assessment Policy V11.

Literacy standards and assessment. In 2011, the absence of a set of comprehensive national standards for measuring students' performance in Kinyarwanda and English was a problem for those who attempted to assess progress in literacy. This problem is being addressed in the Curriculum and Assessment Policy and the accompanying Guide to Assessment.⁵⁶ Together, these documents present a rational, detailed framework for assessment at the classroom, school, district and national levels. The guide instructs teachers, district officials, and standardized test designers on how to assess student performance. The documents' framework links standards (the highest level of measurement), grade-level expectations, and unit-based competences at every level across every subject.

The importance of standards in language instruction is emphasized in the Competence-Based Curriculum Framework. Both the framework and the English language syllabus make mention of standards according to which learners' achievement can be measured by teachers in the classroom and in standardized tests. Neither document, however, defines those standards in a comprehensive manner. The framework lists basic competences for literacy throughout primary and secondary (p. 9):

- Read a variety of texts accurately and fast
- Express ideas, messages and events through writing legible texts in good handwriting with correctly spelt words
- Communicate ideas effectively through speaking using correct phonetics of words
- Listen carefully for understanding and seeking clarification when necessary.

The Guide to Assessment⁵⁷ lists eight sets of competences in lower primary, including two that pertain directly to literacy: communication-oracy and literacy (Box 2).

The P1–P6 English syllabus further specifies competences (learning objectives) in each lesson, although it does not define standards in terms of levels of achievement for each lesson or for each grade level. The scope and sequence for teaching the alphabet and phonological awareness are defined in detail but not the other elements of the curriculum.

Box 2. Competencies in Lower Primary

1. Communication-Oracy

Speaking and giving presentations:

- Explain what they have done clearly, using appropriate language
- Ask and answer simple questions
- Speak clearly to small and large groups
- Listen to others and reply or comment on what they have said

2. Literacy

Reading:

- Connect sounds and letters to make meaning
- Read a variety of simple sentences
- Identify the main idea in a sentence
- Identify features of books, including title, author, illustrations, chapters

Writing:

- Write simple sentences in the present tense
- Use parts of speech correctly in sentences
- Write sentences that follow on from each other in a sequence
- Understand and use simple spelling rules
- Write neatly with correct letter formation

⁵⁶ Republic of Rwanda, Ministry of Education, Rwanda Education Board. (2015, September). *Guide to assessment*.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 88.

Curriculum and assessment issues related to literacy. The rollout of the new curriculum is staggered over three years. Currently, P1 and P4 curricula are available and being introduced. The P1 curriculum defines broad expectations for knowledge and skills as well as a detailed scope and sequence for phonological awareness, but it does not translate these expectations into assessment guidelines or activities for teachers. Teachers will need this kind of assistance if they are to practice continuous assessment.

In May 2012, the National Standards Committee, with support from L3,⁵⁸ defined P3 (and P5) Kinyarwanda and English standards for fluency and comprehension. Subsequently, the learning and teaching materials produced by the REB's Curriculum and Pedagogical Materials Department and L3 have been realigned with the new competence-based curriculum for early-grade Kinyarwanda and English. This curriculum and the materials cover a much broader range of reading skills than fluency and comprehension. Yet, since the LARS tested only students' performance at the P3 level, and the FARS—in line with USAID's literacy goals—focused only on fluency and comprehension (decoding skills), a gap remains between the broad range of reading skills covered in the P1 and P2 curricula and the narrower range of skills tested in early-grade reading assessments.

Language in Education Policy

Rwanda is committed to improving the English skills of both students and teachers, and this improvement receives high priority in the policy objectives of the ESSP. At the same time, the use of Kinyarwanda in P1–P3 is firm policy. Introducing literacy in the mother tongue is an international best practice, based on abundant evidence of its value to the acquisition of literacy not only in the learner's mother tongue but also in second languages. The 2014 draft Language in Education Policy mirrors the education principles of other REB policy documents, particularly the competence-based curriculum, and for the most part it supports international best practices in language instruction.⁵⁹ It is comprehensive and spells out the role for ministry agents with responsibility for implementing the policy.

Language in education issues related to literacy. Implementation of the language policy is facing some challenges in early primary. First, Kinyarwanda has longer, more multi-syllabic words than other languages such as English, making it more difficult for students to read.⁶⁰ The L3 instructional materials in Kinyarwanda, which include stories, exercises for students, a teacher's guide and lesson plans, and a daily audio program, have been shown to be effective in teaching Kinyarwanda. The challenge is to train and support all early-grade Kinyarwanda teachers in how to make good use of the materials.

Another challenge is the transition in P4 from Kinyarwanda to English, where the change is abrupt, largely because English instruction in the first three grades is poor, and so students are not prepared to use English as the language of instruction. In late 2014, the British Council tested teachers to assess the number of teachers whose proficiency levels had improved, according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) scale as indicators of agreed-upon standards.

⁵⁸ Clark-Chiarelli, *Proposed National Reading Standards*, 3.

⁵⁹ The policy mentions “the sequencing of language skills from spoken to written,” possibly implying that instruction in speaking (and reading) should precede instruction in writing. This approach is often contested. On the other hand, this phrase may be saying that young children should learn some oral skills (listening, talking about a story, etc.) before they begin learning to decode written text.

⁶⁰ Clark-Chiarelli, *Proposed National Reading Standards*, 14

The best English teachers are not usually assigned to the lower grades. The 2014 assessment found that primary-level teachers scored lower than secondary-level teachers, and that P1–P3 teachers scored lower than P4–P6 teachers. Seventy-three percent of P1–P3 teachers scored at the lowest levels on the CEFR scale: A1 and A2, well below the objective. Among the report’s recommendations is that “future interventions should focus on primary teachers and English subject teachers in P1–P3.”⁶¹ As part of its Results-Based Aid pilot program (2012–14), the Department for International Development (DFID) has given the government of Rwanda financial incentives to increase the number of teachers competent to use English as the medium of instruction.⁶²

Thus, students, particularly those who have not mastered reading and writing in Kinyarwanda are often ill-prepared to switch to English in P4, which has consequences for their further schooling. The Mid Term Review comments that “high repetition and dropout rate in P4 and P5 are likely to have a direct relationship with the change in medium of instruction, including the very high dropout at the end of P5, the year before preparation for the final exam and transition to lower secondary school.” The revised Language in Education Policy will phase the transition from P4 to P6, effectively introducing bilingual education during those three years. The revised plan for transition, however, will probably not be fully implemented for several years.

Teacher Development and Management Policy

The Teacher Development and Management (TDM) Policy⁶³ applies to primary and secondary school teachers, with some specific objectives that are particular to one or the other of these two levels. The policy cites the goals of the ESSP of 2013–18 related to teachers and summarizes the overall strategy for meeting the goals: “Reorganize the financing of Teacher Training through a new regulatory framework that would strengthen the support given to primary teacher training, lower and upper secondary teacher training including other MINEDUC institutions.”⁶⁴

The TDM policy lists six policy objectives, along with strategies and activities for their implementation⁶⁵ (Box 3). Each of these has implications for the reform of early primary teaching, including literacy.

⁶¹ British Council (March 2015). 2014 Endline assessment of English language proficiency of school teachers in Rwanda: Final report (p. 7). Kigali, Rwanda: British Council.

⁶² Upper Quartile. (2015) *Evaluation of results based aid in Rwandan education: Year two*. “The RBA agreement is intended by DFID to help drive change in the education sector in ways that are agreed government priorities. RBA is additional funding for GoR. It is intended to incentivize improvements in completion at key stages and improvements in teacher competency in English,” p. 5.

⁶³ Republic of Rwanda, Ministry of Education. (2015, November). Teacher development and management (TDM) policy, (Draft).

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 14.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 17–29.

Box 3. Objectives of the TDM Policy*

1. Improve the professional status, image, and attractiveness of teachers and teaching in Rwanda where all teachers are equally valued.
2. Restructure pre-service (initial teacher) training. This entails an increase in the pre-primary and primary teaching certificate program to a post-Year 12 qualification. “Content of all pre-service training will be revised according to a teacher competence framework to be developed, in line with the new competence-based curriculum” (p. 20).
3. Introduce an induction year for newly qualified teachers, and require teachers to be licensed following successful completion of the induction period.
4. Require all teachers to undertake and record Continuous Professional Development (CPD), and ensure that an effective system for appraisal, mentoring, support, assessment, and re-licensing for all teachers is put in place to support it. This entails closer linking and harmonization of pre-service education and CPE. It also includes providing ICT equipment and training to teachers.
5. Enhance school leadership quality, training and certification/licensing. This entails the development of school leader professional standards in instructional leadership as well as administrative.
6. Ensure that the TDM system as a whole is well managed and coordinated among the ministries and agencies involved in the system.

*Excerpted [or Quoted] from the Teacher Development and Management Policy

The policy provides a framework for a wide range of continuing professional development (CPD) activities, including national level training programs, district-level programs, and programs supported by development partners and NGOs.

Under the new regulatory framework, the MINEDUC governs teacher training and monitors the compliance of Teacher Training Colleges (TTCs) and the University of Rwanda’s College of Education (UR-CE). In addition, “the Ministry will create and incorporate into its financial framework a budget line for teacher training, with separate headings for primary teacher training, lower and upper secondary teacher training.”⁶⁶ These important provisions should allow for (i) increased coordination between preservice training and in-service teacher development and (ii) control over the budget of and provision for primary teacher training.

The policy also proposes the reintroduction of general classroom (as opposed to subject) teachers for ECE and P1–3, because “there are major benefits for younger children being taught by the same teacher for all subjects, with an emphasis on the provision of a stable and safe learning environment, and key learning skills delivered by a known adult.”⁶⁷ In terms of language, classroom teachers will be able to better help students make the transition from Kinyarwanda to English. In contrast to two teachers for two languages, one teacher for both languages will be able to help students apply the concepts and grammar they have learned in Kinyarwanda to English. This is especially important for the transition to English as the language of instruction in P4.

Teacher development and management issues related to literacy. Three issues addressed in the TDM policy have implications for training teachers in literacy instruction. First, the

⁶⁶ Ibid, 15.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 18.

coordination between the REB's in-service training programs and the preservice curriculum and instruction at the TTCs is weak. In 2014, Honeyman noted the following:

[an] almost complete lack of institutional coordination between the College of Education, which is responsible for preservice training, and REB, which is responsible for in-service implementation and quality assurance.⁶⁸

This weak coordination means that students in TTCs are not being trained to teach Kinyarwanda or English in accordance with the current curriculum and the instructional materials and practices being introduced by REB with support from L3. The TDM policy addresses this weak connection, but not in detail. The Teacher Professional Development Technical Working Group, a subgroup of the Basic Education Strategy Group, is now drafting a roadmap to strengthen the coordination between UR-CE, TTCs and the REB.

Second, the finalization and implementation of the Working Group's plan will not by itself improve preservice education in literacy instruction. The UR-CE and the 16 TTCs are one year behind the introduction of the competence-based curriculum in their own curriculum reform. Not until 2018 will TTC graduates enter the classroom as teachers who are fully trained in the new curriculum. This situation is being mitigated to some extent in that TTC tutors attended the L3 teacher training in the new curriculum in January 2016.

Third, the TDM policy requires teachers to participate each year in CPD activities, but there is no guidance on how priorities for training are decided. At present, in-service activities are consumed by the district-managed training in the new curriculum and the revamping of the School-Based Mentor Program to rely on local educators, rather than foreigners, to help teachers improve their English language skills. Training early-grade teachers in literacy instruction will require many days of workshops for each teacher each year, and literacy instruction may have to compete for teachers' time available for training. Since teachers are on contract all but a few weeks a year, however, CPD can be fit into most student holiday times.

Learning and Teaching Materials Policy

The Learning and Teaching Materials (LTM) policy⁶⁹ aims to present a framework and systems for the timely provision of adequate quantities of high-quality and affordable LTM to all schools. It documents a considerable reform in the publishing of materials. Prior to 2008, the ministry's National Curriculum Development Center (NCDC) published most textbooks and learning materials. Now, the MINEDUC outsources this responsibility to private publishers and redefines its own role as standards-setting, procurement, and regulation of the competitive textbook market. Schools are expected to maintain secure storage facilities for books and libraries or classroom collections of supplementary learning materials. Supplementary readers, reference books, and other instructional materials are also regulated by the ministry but with different policies and rules than those for textbooks. While textbooks are selected through a procurement process that considers price as well as standards and specifications, supplementary materials only need the approval of the Textbook Advisory Committee (TAC). The LTM policy spells out the roles and responsibilities of schools, districts, publishers, and parents in the shared goal of encouraging reading by making supplementary readers available to students.

⁶⁸ Honeyman, *Early Literacy Promotion*, 58.

⁶⁹ Ministry of Education. (2015, May 6). A policy for learning and teaching materials (Draft).

MINEDUC guidelines state that 50% of the capitation grant amount is to provide school materials such as books. Of this half, 80% is for textbooks and 20% for supplementary materials.⁷⁰ The latter include wall charts, maps, dictionaries, and other materials as well as reading books. As a result, the school's budget for early-grade readers, beyond textbooks, is unspecified but very limited. Until recently, each school selected its own LTM from a list of those approved by REB, but this policy is in flux. Moving forward, the REB may select titles for supplementary readers for all schools, which would relieve publishers of having to market directly to every school and would make consolidation easier at the district level.

LTM Issues Related to Literacy

The procurement of supplementary readers is particularly important to early-grade literacy, because of the recognized need for a rich array of readers for young learners, including leveled readers and “big books” with illustrations for reading aloud. Yet because the MINEDUC budget for supplementary readers is small, schools still depend on NGOs and others to contribute to their supply. UNICEF, for example, in 2015, using the MINEDUC-approved book lists, distributed more than 6,700 books to schools in which it supports interventions. These interventions include 11 early childhood development (ECD) and family centers in which UNICEF is collaborating with Imbuto Foundation, 10 schools in which UNICEF has partnered with Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE-Rwanda), 16 schools in which UNICEF is partnering with the International Education Exchange (IEE), and surrounding TTCs in which UNICEF is partnering with Volunteer Services Overseas to support preservice teacher training.

As the NCDC published its own textbooks until 2008, the private publishing industry, which depends on the market for textbooks, is young, and it needs enough volume to support the 10 to 12 publishers now in business. Stimulating the private market for early-grade readers is a key component of strengthening the culture of reading. It depends in the long term on encouraging adults as well as children to read and purchase books. In the meantime the MINEDUC has increased its purchase of books from private publishers. In 2012, REB issued a tender for publishers to submit supplementary readers for primary schools as part of the authorized list of books. After the 2012 MINEDUC tender, the number of approved Kinyarwanda titles for early primary grade levels increased from 19 to 372. The number of English language storybooks increased from 227 to 1,008.

In 2012, REB also developed, with assistance from the L3 initiative, criteria for producing “big books,” read-aloud stories, and student leveled readers. While these criteria are detailed, they have not helped to speed up the book approval process, and an issue persists regarding the role of the TAC in the publishing process. Publishers and NGOs report that in some ways the TAC process has slowed the flow of books from authors to markets, and several problems in this arena need to be solved. Save the Children has recommended the creation of a Supplementary Materials Approval Committee, separate from the TAC. It would set clear guidelines for publishers and NGOs who develop readers and other supplementary materials and a marking scheme for submitting titles to the REB so that “non-textbook materials are appropriate for supplementary learning purposes.” It would also define a process so that these materials “are reviewed in a timely manner.”⁷¹

⁷⁰ Cozzolino, S. (2014). *Children's book practice & policy baseline: Capitation grants and recreational reading materials* (p. 10). Kigali, RW: Save the Children-Rwanda.

⁷¹ Save the Children. (n.d.). Supporting early grade literacy development. Kigali, RW: Save the Children.

There are also challenges in schools with the use of learning and teaching materials. Cozzolino⁷² found problems with the reliance on capitation grants for schools' provision of early-grade reading materials. Some schools may be using funds intended for reading materials for infrastructure expenses that they consider more urgent. Some are spending more on materials for higher grades than early grades. There is also evidence that, the training they have received in literacy instruction notwithstanding, teachers need more guidance in how to make the best use of supplementary readers. Finally, with the best intention of keeping books safe and in good repair, some teachers are reluctant to let students take books home.

Some initiatives have been taken to solve these problems. In 2013–15, with support from a DFID Innovation for Education grant, Save the Children trained members of the publishing industry (publishers, illustrators, and writers) to produce high-quality, age-appropriate, Kinyarwanda children's books and to distribute these books to schools.⁷³ This project, the Rwandan Children's Book Initiative (RCBI) took measures to improve teachers' use of books in the classroom. The RCBI resulted in the publication of 150 high-quality readers, more than 200,000 copies of which were distributed to schools and communities in Burera and Gicumbi districts. As a result of the RCBI interventions in P1–P3 classrooms in 26 schools (which were measured by a rigorous time-series, control-group evaluation), RCBI students had higher average reading and writing skill scores than control school students. Teachers gained the knowledge, skills, and confidence use books to support reading and learning, and more students were using the books in the classroom and taking them home.

The British Council's Improving Learning Outcomes through Language Supportive Textbooks and Pedagogy (LAST)⁷⁴ activity improved performance of learners in P4, the transition year from Kinyarwanda to English as the language of instruction. The project developed language supportive textbooks (simple language and sentence structure while also allowing for language development through writing, reading, and speaking activities) and trained P4 teachers and tutors at TTCs in related language-supportive pedagogical techniques. The project took place in eight schools among four districts. Learners in the intervention schools performed overall 16% better than those in control schools based on the topics in the books, as well as in individual subjects (English language, mathematics, social studies, and science). Classroom practice also resulted in a more consistent use of textbooks and other learning materials, more students engaged in talk with the teacher and each other, and more learner-centered activities.

Libraries

A notable positive development in the LTM policy and practice is the growth of library services that offer books to early-grade learners as well as to readers of other ages. New policies on library services and book development and new practices are being introduced.

⁷² Cozzolino, *Children's Book Practices*, 16.

⁷³ Malik, S., Balfour, B. J. V., Providence Nzabonimpa, J., Cozzolino, S., Dib, G., & Dowd, A. J. (2015). *Endline evaluation of Rwandan children's book initiative (RCBI)*. Rwanda: Save the Children.

⁷⁴ Innovation for Education. (n.d.). Improving learning outcomes through language supportive textbooks and pedagogy (LAST).

- The National Policy for Library Services,⁷⁵ developed by the Rwanda Library Services under the Ministry of Sports and Culture (MINISPOC), calls for the expansion of a network of community libraries, but strategies and budgeting for achieving this objective have not yet been established.
- The L3 initiative has built and supported 85 community mobile libraries, with at least one in each of the 30 districts. The libraries are operated through partnerships with churches and civil society organizations, providing Kinyarwanda readers for children in early grades as well as books in English and French for readers of all ages. The mobile libraries also organize activities to attract readers and to support their reading.
- An activity to train teacher-librarians was also funded by a DFID Innovation for Education grant. Information Training and Outreach Centre of Africa and its partners trained TTC tutors and teachers to use libraries and information resources. It also trained four academic staff at the UR-CE to teach a future bachelors of education program in teacher-librarianship at the college. A key objective was to introduce the practice of teacher-librarians supporting the development of strong school libraries. A Rwandan library training program for teachers has been designed and awaits university validation, and the four college staff will be able to teach this program.

Early Childhood Education and School Readiness

School readiness is one dimension of a policy priority given to early childhood development (ECD). Based on MINEDUC's conviction that preschool, parent education, and/or other interventions in the lives of children from birth to primary-school age can improve their readiness to learn in primary school as well as affect their lifelong learning, success, and contribution to the economy, ECD is a priority in the ESSP. It receives support from UNICEF and Save the Children, among other international partners.

Rwanda has evidence that school-readiness interventions can affect student performance in primary school. In 2013–15, with support from the Early Literacy and Math Initiative (ELMI; a DFID Innovation for Education grant), Save the Children experimented with two strategies for improving the school-readiness skills of children ages 3–6 years.⁷⁶ One treatment group of children attended high-quality ELMI centers; in another treatment group, parents participated in a group where they learned activities to do with their children. There were two control groups: children who attended non-ELMI ECD centers and children who did not attend any center. Among the findings was that children in both treatment groups—those who attended the high-quality ELMI centers and those whose parents were trained—were better prepared for P1, retained their advantage in P1, and had double the gains of their peers who attended low-quality centers or no centers.

In 2015, the Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion (MIGEPROF) updated the 2011 Early Childhood Development (ECD) Policy Strategic Plan.⁷⁷ Among the policy's six objectives, one

⁷⁵ Republic of Rwanda, Ministry of Sports and Culture. (2012). National Policy for Library Services.

⁷⁶ Save the Children. (2015, June). Early literacy and math initiative endline assessment. Kigali, RW: Save the Children.

⁷⁷ Republic of Rwanda, Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion. (2015). National early childhood development policy strategic plan 2016–2021.

concerns school readiness: “To increase children’s preparedness to cope with formal school environment.”⁷⁸

School readiness is understood to mean equipping children with a specific set of academic skills and abilities, for example to follow directions, demonstrate reading, counting and reasoning skills, and carry out independent work by the time they enter school. Further to this, however, interventions to promote school readiness and transition shall encompass additional six major dimensions including: children’s physical well-being and motor development, social and emotional development, cognitive/language development, self-help skills and general knowledge.⁷⁹

The policy notes research showing that “children who participate in preschool programs are more likely to have better language, verbal and arithmetic skills, and consistently higher reading and cognitive achievement scores.... and are more likely to have long term academic success.”⁸⁰ The policy calls for a one-year school-readiness program for five- and six-year-olds across all districts, with at least one center per cell by 2017. It also mandates a competence-based curriculum for 3- to 6- year-olds. The funding gap for pre-primary education reported to the JRES in 2015, however, was 60%, which raises the question of when this mandate will be fulfilled.⁸¹

While the ECD policy is under the remit of the Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion, MINEDUC is responsible for the school-readiness program. For 2015–16, MINEDUC’s budget for pre-primary education is 1.8% of its total budget.⁸² A cost analysis of pre-primary education, which recognizes MINEDUC’s insufficient budget to cover the costs of the new proposed program, recommends that MINEDUC give highest priority to teacher salaries and second priority to capitation grants and infrastructure. It also recommends that families not be charged fees for pre-primary programs, departing from the actual practice at most centers.⁸³ The goal is to provide access to 17% of the population by 2017, which will trigger a second tranche of funding by the Global Partnership for Education for general support. The current access rate is 12.7%.⁸⁴

Other Literacy-Related Policy Issues

Two policy areas generally considered to be best practices in improving literacy are not prominent in any of the policy papers. One is “opportunity to learn,” which centers on the time available in class for active instruction in literacy and for individual reading. The other is advocacy and promotion of literacy, which is particularly important in a context like Rwanda, where most homes have few print materials, and awareness among parents of the value of reading is low.

Opportunity to Learn

“Opportunity to learn” encompasses policies and practices that give teachers and students more “time on task.” In literacy instruction, this means more time to read as well as to receive literacy-

⁷⁸ Ibid., 8.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 11.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 12.

⁸¹ MINEDUC, Forward-looking Joint Review of the Education Sector Report, June 15, 2015, p. 13.

⁸² JRES PowerPoint presentation on 2015/16 Planned Activities and Draft Budget, slide 5.

⁸³ Kumar, C. (2015, October). An analysis of the costs of pre-primary education in Rwanda, Executive summary (Draft, p. 39). Kigali, RW: UNICEF.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 7.

specific instruction. A key policy affecting opportunity to learn in reading is the number of hours per week allocated in the curriculum to language classes: eight 40-minute lessons for Kinyarwanda in P1–P3 and seven lessons for English in P1–P3. Another factor affecting a student’s opportunity to learn is the number of days that teachers are absent or late for class, as well as the days that students are absent or late. The 2012 EGRA showed that 20% of students were absent in the week before testing, and in 2014, teachers reported that nearly 30% of the students in their classroom were absent on the day of data collection for the FARS. Teacher attendance records observed during the FARS showed that on average, on any given day, 7.5% of all P1, P2, and P3 teachers were absent. These results were consistent with self-reported absenteeism by teachers.⁸⁵ Other factors are the very full curriculum, demands on teachers’ classroom time for administrative tasks, and the very limited opportunities for students to read outside of class. Although there is movement to expand opportunities for independent reading at school, at present few schools have reading rooms or libraries.

Advocacy and Promotion of Literacy

The need to reach parents with information about literacy was evidenced in a knowledge, attitudes, practice (KAP) survey conducted by Save the Children in 2015.⁸⁶ The survey found the following:

- There is a generally low level of public knowledge about children’s cognitive development.
- Parents are supportive of children bringing books home from school, but they would not use spare cash to buy children’s books.
- Households with higher SES status are more likely to support their children’s reading.

Similarly, the nationwide FARS Midline Assessment report states that when asked about problems that inhibit teaching and learning in their school, 86.7% of head teachers cited the problem that parents and caregivers do not support their children’s education.⁸⁷

The paragraph in the 2013 ESSP on literacy recognized the need for a concerted effort by “schools and communities to institute campaigns to raise awareness of the importance of reading and to develop students’ interest in reading” (p. 54). Advocacy activities can take a wide range of forms, depending on the message, the audience, and available resources. Advocacy for early-grade literacy in Rwanda to date has largely centered on raising the awareness of parents of why their children should learn to read and how to help them do so.

For the most part, advocacy activities have been designed and implemented by NGOs, particularly Save the Children Rwanda, Concern Worldwide Rwanda (a partner of EDC in the L3 initiative), UNICEF, and, on a smaller scale, local NGOs, including, among others, Imbutu Foundation, Umuhuza, the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE), and the IEE. Although these activities have been modest to date, they are picking up speed.

In July 2012, the MINEDUC, with support from USAID, launched **Rwanda Reads**. Its mandate is to coordinate the dispersed efforts to advocate for reading and to “provide a platform for information sharing, networking, and promotion of activities and initiatives” to increase opportunities for reading.”⁸⁸ The initiative aims to inspire different actors in the culture of reading to expand their

⁸⁵ FARS, p. 59.

⁸⁶ Save the Children. (2015). Public awareness of emergent and early literacy in Rwanda. Kigali, RW: Save the Children. The survey was administered to 516 respondents from six cells in Rwanda’s five provinces.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 63.

⁸⁸ Draft Revised Terms of Reference Rwanda Reads (April 2016), p. 4.

capabilities so that both supply of and demand for reading materials and reading habits grow, as follows:

- Publishers produce and promote more relevant books and print materials.
- Teachers and community members become authors.
- Parents read for children and for themselves.
- Communities model and encourage the habit of reading.
- Organizations grow via a professional learning community.⁸⁹

Rwanda Reads is tasked with networking and coordinating the activities of these actors. It is governed by a steering committee, chaired by REB and USAID, and a general assembly comprising representatives of its members, which include public and private institutions, organizations, and individuals who are interested in helping Rwanda develop a culture of reading.

In September 2014 and September 2015 during International Literacy Month, Rwanda Reads members organized various activities to promote reading. The main event in June 2015 was Networking Day, which convened about 150 representatives of government, donors, development partners, libraries, schools, publishers, booksellers, and the media to hear speakers, including the young winners of the *Andika Rwanda* national writing competition, organized by REB and L3. A major objective of the June meeting was to support events at the local level, especially during September Literacy Month. The month also included a live conference (*Kubaza Bitera Kumenya*) of MINEDUC officials, which was broadcast on national TV and radio, and it used the *umuganda*, the monthly national day of service, to deliver messages to communities about the importance of literacy and to invite them to participate in literacy week events. These events brought attention to the various channels that can be used to publicize literacy efforts and advocate to communities and organizations that they actively support a culture of reading.

5. Institutional Dynamics Affecting Literacy Reform

The discussion of policies has touched on some of the institutional structures and dynamics that underlie reforms in literacy, in some ways facilitating them, in other ways impeding them. This section of the report briefly summarizes what other analysts have recently described in much more detail about the institutional relationships that impact literacy. In particular, Honeyman analyzes the principal actors; planning, budgeting and implementation processes; the influence of incentives; and the institutional gaps and contractions in literacy and the basic education sector.⁹⁰ The MINEDUC's National Education for All 2015 Review also provides a 15-year retrospective—a comprehensive presentation of basic education structures and programs with some historical perspective.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Ibid., 2.

⁹⁰ Honeyman, *Early Literacy Promotion*.

⁹¹ Republic of Rwanda, Ministry of Education. (2015, January). *National education for all 2015 review*. Retrieved from <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002317/231725e.pdf>

This brief summary is framed by the “roadblocks” discussed in the Mid Term Review,⁹² most of which are about institutional barriers to improving education. They include funding, inter-ministerial relationships, delivery and measurement systems, and the inherent complexity of teaching and learning processes.

Funding

Most components of Rwandan basic education and literacy—teacher training, teaching and learning materials, assessment, etc.—have budget shortfalls. The JRES’s estimated required funding to achieve the policy objectives cannot be met by the MINEDUC budget. This means that the ministry depends on international donors and local NGOs to provide resources, which are in turn influenced by their own sources’ priorities. It also means that in many instances policy objectives are not met—they are either postponed into future years or abandoned.

There are no earmarks for literacy initiatives. Budgets for teachers, materials, etc., generally cover all subjects and all grade levels, so how they are spent each year depends on the REB and other MINEDUC agencies’ priorities. This is sound policy insofar as it promotes a balanced distribution of funds among many competing priorities, but it can frustrate those who believe that literacy deserves the highest priority.

Capitation grants are the basis for funding learning and teaching materials. In 2012, Save the Children conducted research in a sample of 11 schools in Gicumbi district on the availability of supplementary books—read-alouds and leveled readers—in schools and the policies and practices that affected their availability.⁹³ The researcher found that in spite of the new policies intended to increase the supply of readers for early grades, most young children did not have a good selection of readers appropriate for their skill level. Often the school’s funds allocated for supplementary materials were actually spent on books for P4–P6. Teachers tended to purchase multiple copies of only a few titles, rather than a wide diversity of titles. Moreover, teachers allowed little time for individual (recreational) reading, and they did not often read aloud to their students.

MINEDUC’s Relationships with Other Ministries and Sectors

Literacy instruction in primary school is situated in a complex, decentralized institutional environment. The most problematic relationship is between MINEDUC, which is accountable at a national level for raising the primary completion rate as well as achieving nine other policy objectives, and the Ministry of Local Government (MINALOC), which has authority through district offices, overhead teachers, and teachers—key players in improving education quality. Rwanda’s decentralization of government means that District Directors of Education (DEOs) recruit, hire, deploy, and manage teachers and head teachers. These DEOs do not receive any specialized preparation for their positions,⁹⁴ which are demanding management jobs, and they can find it challenging to be responsible for schools and the officials who administer them in the sectors and cells of their districts.

Under the auspices of the Capacity Development Fund for Education in Rwanda, international technical assistance was provided to MINEDUC and MINALOC to strengthen the roles and capacity

⁹² ESSP Mid Term Review, Draft 2, 80–82.

⁹³ Cozzolino, *Children’s Book Practices*.

⁹⁴ Honeyman, *Early Literacy Promotion*, 56.

of local education officers—DEOs and Sector Education Officers (SEOs) in particular. Consultants identified capacity gaps in ESSP-based education planning, budgeting, and monitoring processes at the district level.⁹⁵ In particular, they concluded the following:

- Education has a relatively low priority in decentralized planning, and district plans do not cover the full priorities of the ESSP.
- Districts and schools are the implementers of ESSP, and school-level and district-level roles and resources need to be given more attention.⁹⁶

While this diagnosis was primarily concerned with management and administrative roles of local education officers, it underlines their critical role in supporting literacy instruction by monitoring the implementation of policies and programs related to literacy, such as the use and storage of textbooks, supervision of teachers, and schools' use of capitation grants for P1–P3 supplementary readers. DEOs also need assistance in advocating for adequate district funding for primary education functions that have an impact on literacy instruction and community support.

Another weak institutional relationship is between the REB and the UR-CE, which, as described above, is responsible for preservice education. The official link between these organizations is the Higher Education Council, a MINEDUC agency “mandated to provide accreditation, quality standards and monitoring and evaluation services, and advise the Minister on matters related to higher education.”⁹⁷ This gives the MINEDUC the authority to dictate the content of the curriculum of the UR-CE and TTCs, but so far, it has not been an efficient management structure.

In addition to MINEDUC, MINALOC, and UR-CE, other ministries have responsibilities that affect the effectiveness of literacy programs. MINISPOC shares responsibility with MINEDUC for library and archive services, and the MINEDUC outsourced the responsibility for expanding a network of community libraries to Kigali Public Library. MINEDUC and MIGEPROF share responsibilities for early childhood development and education. MIGEPROF's responsibilities for gender and family issues bear heavily on how children's schooling is supported at home and how gender dynamics play out in school. Also critical, of course, is MINEDUC's relationship with the Ministry of Finance. Yet there is no government body that pulls the responsible officers in these institutions together in an ongoing, focused strategy and plan to improve literacy.

Delivery Systems and Measurement Systems

The delivery of training and support to teachers and head teachers and of learning and teaching materials to classrooms has improved in recent years to the point that they are no longer major roadblocks. Measurement systems have room for improvement. At the school and classroom level, the new curriculum introduces an official policy of formative (continuous) assessment, which teachers will have to master, not only for the benefit of their own teaching but also to help inform sound practices on whom to promote and whom to hold back. Districts are now responsible for end-of-year tests, and making good use of the information these tests provide will require a much stronger, standards-based system of assessment-information management at the district level. At the national level, the report on the 2014 LARS has not yet been released.

⁹⁵ CfBT Education Trust. (2015, September). Capacity strengthening for decentralised education planning and monitoring (DEPAM) final report. Kigali, RW.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 18

⁹⁷ Republic of Rwanda Ministry of Education, *National Education for All 2015 Review*, 108–109.

Complexity of Improving Teaching and Learning

The ESSP Mid Term Review concludes with the reminder that policy objectives on improving quality are more difficult to formulate, implement, and measure than policy objectives on increasing access.

All of the capacity and relationship-focused observations above are partially predicated on the fact that developing the quality of teaching and learning outcomes is complex, unpredictable, and difficult to plan, compared with, for example, a program of constructing schools, or of training a set number of teachers. ...It requires investment in activities that have a complex relationship to high level indicators (for example, the link between teacher development and primary completion).⁹⁸

This conclusion bears directly on early-grade literacy instruction, which is critical to raising the rate of primary school completion yet dependent on progress in a myriad of intersecting and complex changes in curriculum and materials, teaching, assessment, and other quality aspects of education.

6. Culture

A fundamental factor in students' learning to read is the amount of support they get at home and in the community for their reading habits—the culture of reading in which they live and learn. Children will learn the skills, knowledge, and values they are taught in school with more ease if these are consonant with what they learn at home and from their elders and friends in the community. There is abundant evidence of this relationship in Rwanda as well as worldwide.

The Importance of Culture – Evidence in Rwanda

Section 2 of this report presented evidence from the four recent early-grade literacy assessments of the impact of the home environment on how much Rwandan students learn. Students who live with literate family members, especially family members who read aloud and take interest in their children's education, learn more than those who do not have such adult influences. Students who live with books or other reading matter at home do better in school than those who do not experience print or digital text as part of their family life.

Other studies of the home and community environment show similar results. The main factors that hinder performance in reading seem to be poverty, attitudes of elders toward reading, and the availability of books, all of which are interrelated.

Concern Worldwide Rwanda Community Study

Concern Worldwide Rwanda supported research on the values, attitudes, and practices within communities regarding reading, particularly young children's reading.⁹⁹ The research team

⁹⁸ ESSP Mid Term Review, Draft 2, p. 82.

⁹⁹ Holland, M. (2012). Final draft report: Community-based barriers and opportunities to promote reading attainment among early grade learners in the rural Southern Province of Rwanda. Limerick, IE: Centre for Global Development through Education, Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick, Ireland. The report's findings on the culture of reading are distilled here, often quoted directly, from pages 39-72 of the Holland report.

collected data in spring 2012 in Rwanda's Southern Province, where many of the schools ranked among the lowest in scores on the LARS. The researchers conducted semi-structured group interviews with samples of P1–P4 students, teachers, and parents and guardians in 10 poor rural communities and 2 urban communities. They found a great disparity between the 10 rural schools and the 2 urban schools in children's opportunities for reading.

In the urban schools, students had more opportunities for reading. The urban community was much wealthier than the communities in rural settings. Print and reading materials were in close proximity to the school. Students often had support from parents who were well-educated. The challenges facing the majority of urban children were more to do with excessive watching of television or being distracted by the local cinema hall and mobile phones. Most of the urban households had electricity, and the wealthier households had reading materials. Most children were not expected to do chores, and they were given time to play, to watch television, and to read their own books.

In rural schools, where there was no culture of reading in most communities, the findings were very different. The traditional means of transmitting information and knowledge in Rwanda is oral. Accordingly, reading and writing are new practices. In many of the rural communities, there were few role models of people who read and few or no reading materials available at home or in the community. Where researchers were told that reading materials were available, it emerged that these were almost always the Bible or some religious leaflets and pamphlets. Parents claimed that even those who could read within the community did not do so. As children are good at imitating what they see (or what they do *not* see), this is a strong potential influencer of their early literacy attitudes and behaviors.

At the same time, communities recognized the great importance of reading and highly valued it. It was seen as the way out of poverty and a foundation for a better life for children and families. Parents had high aspirations for their children, and reading was recognized as the means to achieve these goals.

Most young children were not getting support for reading at home. There was little evidence in the rural schools of storytelling, rhyme reciting, or singing songs to young children. Many schools were not aware of the need to provide reading experiences for children in the early years of primary school, and the schedule did not dedicate time for individual reading. Teachers did not send books home with young children, and homes did not have them. Parents did not know how to support young children with reading. There was a marked difference in parental support for reading and school work between children in the lower grades and those in P5–P6. Parents perceived that reading began during or after P4. By and large, parents did not appreciate the need and importance of supporting young children in reading.¹⁰⁰

Where families lived in poverty, there was no time left after performing household chores to do anything other than eat and sleep. For those households with no artificial light, reading was

¹⁰⁰ This belief may reflect actual school practices. Cozzolino reported that schools tend to buy supplementary books for students in the upper grades (P4-P6) because "students in lower grades (P1-P3) could not yet read, and therefore would not make ample use of the books. P1-P3 teachers noted that the difficult orthography system characteristic to Kinyarwanda prevents children from being able to read until they have learnt all of the complex consonant blends. According to the rate of phonics introduction specified in the national curriculum, this competency is not achieved until P3" (p. 17).

impossible after dark. By and large, those children who attended the morning shift in school did chores in the afternoon, and those who attended the afternoon shift did chores in the morning. Typical chores included fetching jerry cans of water, collecting firewood, sweeping the house and compound, taking care of younger siblings, taking animals to graze, and harvesting food for the table. In the case of the poorest children, these chores extended to income-generating activities, such as harvesting, portering, and attending market.

At the same time, parents wanted to support children's reading, and communities welcomed initiatives to support children's reading. Some educated and literate parents were making sacrifices to ensure that children in the upper grades of primary school got support in school work at home. Some parents read the Bible or the Koran and other religious materials with their children. Children were enthusiastic about reading.

The support mechanism between home and school was weak. Teachers did not feel supported by parents in their efforts to teach reading. Teachers believed that many parents were not interested. Likewise, most parents did not know how to support teachers in their efforts to teach reading. The role of parents in supporting reading was not clear. Most parents considered that teachers were responsible for teaching children to read. Parents saw their own role as providing materials; sending children to school; and then, possibly, following up on attendance, behavior, and discipline in school. Many parents did not meet with teachers to discuss children's progress. This view was most prevalent in the poorer communities and among those who were less well-educated themselves.

At the same time, parents had a high regard for the work of teachers in teaching their children to read. They considered teachers to be motivated and competent. Teachers would like to work with parents to improve children's reading. Most parents attended regular group meetings with head teachers and/or local community leaders. TTCs were active in all schools in the study.

Save the Children Studies on the Culture of Reading

Since 2013, at least two Save the Children publications in Rwanda have reported on research on the culture of reading. These studies provide insights similar to those documented by Concern Worldwide on the beliefs and attitudes of parents, teachers, and others regarding early-grade reading.

Literacy Boost Rwanda Home Literacy Environment Survey Baseline Report¹⁰¹

In the autumn of 2013, researchers from Stanford University led a survey of the Home Literacy Environment (HLE) in parts of Gicumbi district in the Northern Province on Rwanda. In contrast to the regions covered in the Concern Worldwide Rwanda study, Gicumbi is one of the districts that ranked highest in scores on the LARS survey. The researchers used a validated questionnaire and an observation instrument to survey parents and guardians to learn what culture exists around reading in Rwanda and to determine average beliefs, expectations, and practices around reading and literacy of parents and caregivers.¹⁰² Even though the study area of Gicumbi was "high

¹⁰¹ Friedlander, E., Ngabo Habimana, B., Goldenberg, C. (2014). Literacy boost Rwanda home literacy environment survey baseline report. Kigali, RW: Save the Children.

¹⁰² Ibid., ii.

performing” in comparison with the Concern Worldwide Rwanda study area, findings were similar. The Stanford researchers summarized their findings as follows:¹⁰³

There is a clear dearth of appropriate reading material for children in the home. The most common print materials were religious materials, with 60.2% of families reporting that they had some religious materials in the home. Following this were textbooks, found in 37.3% of homes. Adult books were found in less than 1 out of every 5 homes, and children’s books were found in less than one 1 of every 10 homes. While pens and pencils were found in over four out of every five houses, paper to write with was seen in only 41% of homes.

Most households have someone who can read and write. In over 90% of households, family members reported that at least one family member could read and write. Reading and writing was not, however, a skill every person had. Just over 50% of all family members could read and write. In nearly 75% of households, someone at home was reported as reading to the child and helping the child study during the school term.

Reading is associated predominantly with school and teachers. The majority of adults who could read (64%) reported that their teacher taught them to read and write. Only 12% said that their parents taught them to read, and 8% said that their parents taught them to write. Nearly a quarter of respondents replied that they read for religious reasons. Only 10% said that they read to relax, for entertainment, or to alleviate boredom, indicating that reading was not seen as a pleasure or leisure activity.

Despite the seemingly limited scope for reading in the home, respondents had overwhelmingly positive beliefs about reading and learning. At least 98% of family members agreed with these statements:

It is important for a child to be exposed to books and other writing from a young age.

- Every child should learn how to read.
- There are many benefits to knowing how to read.
- Parents and teachers should work together to teach reading.
- Children should learn to read from their older siblings or friends.
- Knowing how to read is necessary for getting a good job one day.
- Parents should be involved in teaching their children how to read.

At least 92% agreed to the following statements:

- Reading is an activity that is valued in their community.
- They feel confident they can help their child learn to read
- People who can read have higher standing in the community.¹⁰⁴

When asked “How do you help your child to learn?” the most common responses were that they purchased school materials (59%) and that they read to their child (25%). Nine percent of respondents replied that they do not help their child learn.

¹⁰³ These findings are distilled and often quoted directly from pages iv-vi of the Friedlander et al. report.

¹⁰⁴ The researchers note, however, that “it is impossible to determine whether these are truly the beliefs of the respondents, or whether they were trying to answer questions ‘correctly’ to the data collector. Indeed, when we asked the reverse of the penultimate item above (I feel confident I can help my child to read), we received a slightly different response. When asked whether they agree with the statement ‘It is difficult for someone like me to help my child to learn to read’, 38 percent of respondents agreed with the statement.”

Public Awareness of Emergent and Early Literacy

Save the Children surveyed a sample of parents and guardians to find out about public awareness of emergent and early literacy. Sixty-seven percent of the children who were subjects were between 5 and 9 years old; 30% were younger than 5 years.¹⁰⁵ The researchers asked questions about the KAP of parents and caregivers in six different cells in Rwanda's five provinces. Overall, 71% of the parents were literate.¹⁰⁶

Knowledge. Most parents did not know that a child's intelligence begins to develop at age 0, and only 32% knew that children can begin learning letters from the age of 2–4 years. In contrast, they knew about methods that parents could use to help children learn to read, with 84% able to provide at least one specific example.

Attitudes. This study revealed mixed attitudes toward the promotion of emergent and early literacy. On the one hand, parents and caregivers were strongly supportive of allowing children age 5 and younger to access books (with 85% agreeing) and allowing primary school pupils to take books home from school (with 94% agreeing). Only 21%, however, mentioned that they would use a spare Rwf300 to buy literacy-related learning materials for their children, rather than something else such as sweets.

Who is responsible for helping children to learn to read?

- 65% responded that parents have some responsibility.
- 88% said that teachers hold this responsibility.
- 81% of respondents said that they felt capable of helping a child learn to read.

Practices. Forty-one percent of the families had carried out three or more literacy-promoting activities in the three days prior to the survey, and 76% had carried out at least one such activity. The most common examples were the vocabulary-building activities of “showing or teaching the child something new” (reported by 50% of families) and singing to a child (42%). Slightly fewer families reported reading a book with a child (42%) or helping a child learn the alphabet/letters (40%).

Summary of the Culture of Reading

Three small-scale research studies point to similar conclusions about the environment in many Rwandan communities, particularly those that are poor and those that are rural, in which children are learning to read. Many children have neither time to read, or if they do have time, they have no books or other materials to read at home. While parents place a high value on reading, they see this as the schools' responsibility. Because adults as well as youth and children communicate orally, reading is something foreign to their communities. In regard to literacy, there is a dissonance between what young students observe during most hours of their lives as skills and practices that are valuable and useful and what they are asked to do in school, which is to attach sounds and sense to written words.

¹⁰⁵ Save the Children. (2015). Public awareness of emergent and early literacy in Rwanda. Kigali, RW: Author.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 14.

Report Summary and Conclusion

The driving force behind the MINEDUC's investment in improving literacy is the ESSP's outcome of 100% completion in primary education. This outcome will be difficult to achieve without increased improvement rates in literacy performance across Rwanda. Progress to date toward the outcome is evident, however, and further progress looks promising based on (1) the MINEDUC's policies and plans in place to improve reading, (2) changes in institutional dynamics, and (3) growing attention to the culture of reading. Here we summarize these movements.

Progress toward Reading Outcomes

Rwandan students in the early grades are learning to read, and instructional practices introduced in early-grade reading in recent years are proving effective. Data from assessments provide evidence that recent interventions in Rwanda in literacy instruction are making an impact on performance. Yet the data show that not all students have equal opportunities to learn to read. Their chance of performing well depends upon their gender and age, their schools and teachers, their families' reading habits, and the resources available to their families.

Strategy and Policies that Affect Reading Outcomes

In addition to the technical aspects of instruction, literacy outcomes are strongly influenced by the MINEDUC's overall strategic approach to education reform and policies in the basic education sector. Early-grade literacy is tied in the ESSP to broader strategic outcomes in basic education. The REB has drafted a number of policies to improve basic education, which all have an impact on literacy instruction. While comprehensive and generally reflecting best practices, each of these policies raises challenges in implementation.

- The new competence-based curriculum brings official policy on instruction in literacy (and other subjects) much closer to the learning and teaching materials produced by the L3 initiative and now in the classroom. Although competence-based instruction will take time for teachers to master, it will ultimately help students of varying abilities learn to read.
- The Curriculum and Assessment Policy and the Guide to Assessment address several implementation challenges. National standards for student performance and teachers of Kinyarwanda and English are still incomplete. In addition, the nationwide assessment of literacy, the LARS, needs to be realigned with the competence-based curriculum.
- The TDM policy lays out some needed reforms that impact literacy instruction, but their implementation will be challenging. While the policy provides for far-reaching changes in preservice teacher education, these will take time. Coordination between preservice education and CPD must be strengthened so that graduates leave the colleges prepared to teach the new curriculum. CPD will also be reformed so that teachers are required to participate each year in training through a sustainable system. While this provides opportunity for in-service training in literacy instruction, training in other subject matter and methods may compete for teachers' time.
- The LTM policy opens the door for a greater selection of textbooks and supplementary materials by outsourcing book writing and production to private publishers and having the MINEDUC regulate a competitive book market. While a significant reform, this policy does

not close the gap between the high volume and variety of materials required for a sound education (including materials in the early grades) and the MINEDUC's limited budget for materials. At present, nongovernment sources provide many of the supplementary readers. The flow of these essential books into the hands of young readers is stymied by the small amounts that schools can allocate from their capitation grants for supplementary readers and by persisting problems in the approval process for these books. The engagement of private publishers in a competitive market for early-grade reading materials should, in the long run, stimulate that market, leading to more books that community libraries can afford, and thus distribute the costs of children's reading materials between schools and communities.

- While improving the English skills of both students and teachers is a high priority in the ESSP policy objectives, starting literacy instruction in Kinyarwanda in P1–P3 is also a firm policy. Implementation of these policies must overcome several barriers, including the abrupt transition in P4 from Kinyarwanda to English, largely because English instruction in the first three grades is poor, and students are not prepared to use English as the language of instruction. One source of this problem is the generally low level of English language skill of P1–P3 teachers. The REB is addressing this policy in its move to improve English language instruction.
- MINEDUC is responsible for the school-readiness program in the Early Childhood Development policy, over which the Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion has general authority. Although school readiness is a relatively recent policy objective, it is a high priority in the ESSP. Because the provision of school readiness to all children has significant costs, the funding gap is a major implementation problem here as well.

Two other issues in literacy instruction are frequently noted in policy discussions but not in the policy papers: (1) time in school that is dedicated to reading and (2) the advocacy and promotion of literacy. Time dedicated to reading (“opportunity to learn”) has received attention in CPD, where teachers are advised that this is important and given suggestions for how to manage it in large classrooms and under tight schedules. Advocacy and promotion of reading is being advanced through the efforts of the Rwanda Reads network and its members, including EDC, Save the Children Rwanda, Concern Worldwide Rwanda, UNICEF, Imbuto Foundation, FAWE, and IEE.

Institutional Dynamics that Affect Reading Outcomes

Among the most serious challenges to improving literacy instruction is the disjuncture between the MINEDUC/REB, which is responsible for improving the quality of instruction, and the MINALOC, which is responsible for managing schools and teachers. The REB operates largely at the national level and affects instruction through the delivery of materials, training, assessment, and other resources. The MINALOC, while headquartered at the national level, operates through its local agents, including directors of education, sector education officers, head teachers, and teachers. Literacy instruction—a critical component of basic education—can easily get lost among the more urgent tasks facing mayors and the more persistent demands for funding. The issues and challenges to decentralization are being studied by the government, but more needs to be done in cooperation between the MINEDUC and MINALOC at each level of the governance system.

The Culture of Reading

The culture of reading embodies not only the availability of reading materials and the presence of people who read but also the beliefs and attitudes of parents, teachers, and others regarding early-grade reading. Children have little opportunity to read at home or in the community and few role models of readers. In very poor families, when children are not in school, they are doing chores or sleeping. There is no time left for reading, and often no light for reading after dark.

Parents believe that it is the school's responsibility to teach reading, and teachers believe that parents do not support what children are taught in the classroom. There is little communication between the two about students' reading habits or performance. At the same time, parents appreciate that teachers for teaching reading, and teachers would like to work with parents to improve their children's reading. Communities see reading as the way out of poverty.

There is both need and opportunity for building bridges between schools, homes, and communities that will give young students more books and materials to read, time and to read, role models, and active encouragement by their elders to read.

Conclusion

In conclusion, though the story of early-grade literacy in Rwanda is still in the early chapters, it holds the promise of a rewarding time to come. The ESSP commits Rwanda to universal primary completion, which will depend on all students learning to read in the early grades. The MINEDUC, and particularly the REB and its technical working groups, has laid a strong foundation of policies and plans to achieve this outcome. The new competency-based curriculum sets the stage for improved instruction, and all classrooms have a set of learning and teaching materials that have been proven to be effective. Other reforms in basic education will improve literacy instruction, as will stronger ties among the ministries that have responsibilities for basic education. Efforts have begun to strengthen support among communities and families for reading instruction in school and outside of school.

Achieving the outcome of all children reading will take time. Improvements in early-grade literacy depend on a myriad of complex changes in curriculum and materials, teaching, assessment, and other quality and access aspects of education. However, the dedication and determination shown to date by the REB and others in MINEDUC to achieving the outcome are encouraging and hold promise for the future of Vision 2020.