

Buddy Reading Kenya

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Credit: Kat Harrison/SolarAid

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The NBDCK (National Book Development Council of Kenya) project aims to raise reading outcomes by offering extracurricular reading opportunities to public school children in the Kisii area of western Kenya. This is a micro level incremental innovation which originally included comparison to a control group, but this is no longer the case. Grade six students ('mentors') are trained to read with grade 1 and 2 students ('buddies') during informal small group sessions supervised by teachers trained to this end. The groups sessions are held 2-4 times weekly on school grounds immediately after the school day. Both mentors and buddies benefit, as mentors guide their group of 4-5 buddies through a reading process that includes picture reading, prediction, choral reading and mentors reading aloud to buddies. The development of decoding skills is taught mostly during school hours and is less stressed at these times. In the NBDCK project, reading takes place in English, Swahili, and the mother tongue, Ekugusii. Age level materials are provided in all the three languages. NBDCK's main implementing partner is the public schools. This is a potentially low cost program, as mentors are not remunerated. While the innovation is effective, the NBDCK is not particularly high in best practices. See Innovations Grid annex.

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Project Implementation and Capacity Building

The implementation process includes the development/acquisition and distribution of materials, the training of project coordinators (school teachers) and mentors in the reading approach, and the supervision of the mentors.

NBDCK required minimal input from the TA technical consultant with the exception of M&E.

Progress and the measurement thereof

Coordinators and mentors were trained, reading materials provided, and sessions regularly held. Due to the presence in the area of complementary programs, or portions of programs, an initial attempt was made to isolate potential variables by establishing a series of test groups (Buddy Reading and Reading Kenya, Reading Kenya only, Buddy Reading only and neither), but the popularity of Buddy Reading led to contamination of the other groups. This occurred early in this program and continued throughout, distorting any discriminatory measurement of learning outcomes between test and control groups. (It should be noted that refusing to share program innovations with other schools and students would have been unacceptable in this environment.)

Any positive increase among test classes may now be comparatively less important when compared to contaminated control classes. As a baseline measurement could not be organized before the start of the program, a baseline reading level of test and control classes was taken from the preceding year-end national standardized assessment. This assessment reports only 'total learning', and does not distinguish reading skills

from the aggregate. (See accompanying Evaluation Plan documents for full details)

The increased reading level of the test groups could still be comparatively assessed against a control group if a new set of non-contaminated control classes were selected, but this would require program extension. The Buddy Reading personnel have not shown much enthusiasm for or comprehension of evaluation procedures, and so it is unlikely to benefit from further input or from program extension.

Results

While the innovation does seem to be theoretically sound, results based on student testing are inconclusive. Considerable confusion revolves around the issues of contamination as well as around which competencies were tested and compared between groups. The TA technical consultant did observe Buddy Reading sessions during which mentors were effectively leading buddies through the prescribed reading process, though one could not determine at that point if improvement was occurring compared to a reliable baseline. Decoding skills transfer did, at this point, appear to be beyond the abilities of the mentors, and there was little implication of regular school teachers in the reading process.

Despite references by BR staff to insufficient funding, or rather of insufficient budget planning/spending, the innovation would also seem to be very cost effective.

Mitigating circumstances and their effects on results

This intervention necessarily builds upon skills learnt in regular class sessions, such as decoding, and so its impact would be proportional to how well students learn in school.

The staff was content to rely on familiar measurements of student learning outcomes, that of the national standardized exams, and hesitant to making additional efforts to demonstrate a plausible relationship between the reading sessions and increased reading outcomes. Even apart from contamination, the results would not have been able to demonstrate a plausible effect of the innovation on student learning outcomes.

Communication between BR staff and TrustAfrica was characterized by long periods of non-response on the part of the BR staff.

Lessons Learned

The contamination of the non-test groups can be understood as a sign of popularity, contributing to project sustainability, while simultaneously detracting from demonstrable impact of the innovation.

- *The successful implication of a non-paid work force can result in an important cost reduction, contributing to high cost efficiency.*
- *The interaction between student readers and student mentors can be beneficial to both groups at the same time and at the same cost.*
- *An informal language sensitive format can provide an additional learning environment complementary to that of the classroom.*

- *The NBDCK project is a package of good practices, including appropriate language use, methodology, reading materials, etc. Any change in reading level should be understood as the combined effect of all these practices and not attributable to any one in isolation.*

Scaling

This innovation is both novel and likely to improve the reading outcomes of both student mentors and student buddies. For that reason, it can be recommended for scaling up in other suitable environments.

Scaling could be quantitative to other cooperating schools and for any appropriate language in which materials can be developed or procured. The mentoring approach could be functionally scaled to other purposes such as health or sports education.

The present staff has not shown itself to have the capacity or the interest in measuring student learning outcomes. For this reason, scaling up would best be done by a different operator, or considerable time and resources should be spent training the present staff to bring their capacity and motivation to a level that will allow them to perform these tasks.

Preliminary Recommendations

Given its versatility and potential low cost, the Buddy Reading innovation should be expanded to other environments. Furthermore, the NBDCK staff can be considered as competent and potentially helpful to such expansion, with the exception of M&E. If executed by a more evaluation conscious operator, there could be better anecdotal evidence, and perhaps even measurable evidence to support the innovation's intuitive soundness.