



Supporting Children to Learn During Forced School Closures

Lessons Learned from Read Liberia

Given what we have learned through COVID-19, what lessons can we use to support learning during future school closures?

In Liberia, as elsewhere around the world, recent school closures disrupted learning for all students. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have exacerbated pre-existing education inequality, especially disadvantaging girls, students with disabilities, people living in extreme poverty, and other marginalized groups. For Read Liberia's technical team, the recent pandemic was a catalyst for innovation. The project quickly adapted to a new virtual implementation model to continue trainings, community engagement, and teacher instructional coaching.

1. Supporting Ministry strategies

Activating plans and processes put in place during the Ebola crisis, the Liberian Ministry of Education (MOE) quickly established an Education in Emergencies strategy that centered around its Teaching by Radio approach to continue to engage students and their families in learning activities while at home. Read Liberia quickly adapted to supporting the MOE in this strategy, developing radio scripts based on the MOE's Read Liberia teaching and learning materials, including student activity books that students have at home.

2. Teaching by radio

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Read Liberia collaborated with the MOE technical committee that developed and launched the Teaching by Radio program. The main objectives of this program were to provide continuous instruction for pending examinations and to keep students academically engaged through the stay-at-home period. In addition to developing and presenting language arts and reading lessons for students in grades 1 and 2, Read Liberia provided hands-on technical support to first-time radio lesson developers and presenters and solicited listeners' feedback to improve the activity. Because the MOE was not able to monitor community engagement with the Teaching by Radio shows, Read Liberia Community Mobilization Officers used their community contacts to gather usage data for the MOE.

Read Liberia recorded 21 radio-appropriate lessons in collaboration with the Liberia MOE's curriculum development center. Each 30-minute lesson included activities that the target groups could complete before or after the broadcast. Because Read Liberia encouraged students in its schools to take their student activity books home with them every night, those students were able to follow along with the radio lessons using their books. However, the lessons were developed so that students who did not have the Read Liberia materials could also benefit. While listening to the radio, students actively participated in the lessons by singing, reading, writing, answering questions, and solving problems in ways that reflected active listening and learning. Read Liberia also helped its teachers send lesson packets to parents for students to work on at home.

Read Liberia also worked with the MOE to identify which Read Liberia school communities were not reached by the national radio broadcasts and worked with community-based radio stations to expand reach to those communities. Overall, the Teaching by Radio activity provided an unanticipated yet important opportunity for the MOE to demonstrate its buy-in to and ownership of Read Liberia's early grade reading model, as the MOE used the model in support of its national broadcasts during the pandemic.

In addition to the Read Liberia lessons, a Teachers Tip program and two Guest Reader segments were recorded. These programs promoted behaviors that help teachers in the classroom and parents in the home to support students in learning to read. To draw in listeners, Read Liberia engaged Liberian celebrities to read on air. These included Henry Amazin Toe, a musician; Lekpele Nyamolon, a poet;

Brenda Brewer Moore, founder of Kids Education Engagement Program (KEEP); and Facia Harris, a women's rights activist and radio producer.

3. Psychosocial support

The MOE asked all its partners to consider weaving psycho-social support to students and their parents into their radio programs. In response, Read Liberia built into its radio lessons opportunities for learners to reflect on their feelings and find productive ways to handle them. For examples, such opportunities were incorporated when introducing new vocabulary words, such as “terrible” or “alone,” and when reflecting on stories in which characters experienced strong feelings, such as being frightened or sad.

4. Training and coaching support

Despite the school closures, it was important to train teachers and principals on the revised Read Liberia teaching and learning materials. This training was conducted virtually over 10 days using a combination of interactive voice response messages provided by the telecommunication group Viamo, teacher self-study guides, daily text messages and direct phone conversations with coaches, and group social media chats. Each day started with a Viamo call to teachers to introduce the day's activities. Teachers then worked through the self-study guides, calling or texting their assigned coaches for any needed support. Each day ended with coaches quizzing each teacher on the content learned and a group social media chat to discuss the day's lesson. For schools in areas with limited cellular network access, Read Liberia pre-recorded the Viamo messages on MP3 players, distributed them—along with the teacher self-study guides—to the appropriate schools before training started, and scheduled opportunities throughout the 10 days for phone-based check-ins.

Because Read Liberia coaches and MOE master trainers and Education Officers had either electronic tablets or smart phones, trainings for these groups were held via online platforms, such as Zoom, WhatsApp, and Facebook chat groups.

When the COVID-19 pandemic began to affect Liberia, Read Liberia pivoted away from the usual face-to-face coaching support and instead provided this support to teachers using mobile phones. During these scheduled phone support sessions, teachers modeled daily lessons from their teacher instructional guides and discussed Teaching by Radio lessons, while coaches provided real-time feedback. Teachers with intermittent network coverage scheduled calls in advance and then walked or took motorbikes to locations with network coverage, such as the next town or a hill, to receive the coaching support. Teachers adopted and embraced this virtual phone support.

5. Community engagement

Throughout the pandemic, Read Liberia continued community engagement and social mobilization activities in school communities. Community Mobilization Officers and School Community Mobilizers engaged with parents via phone to encourage them to listen to the Teaching by Radio programs with their children and to undertake simple, doable behaviors in their homes to help children read, such as setting aside time and space for children to read. When pre-primary and primary level students were instructed to remain at home, parents retrieved their lessons from schools, and Community Mobilization Officers and School Community Mobilizers supported parents in using the lessons with their children.

Because in-person parent-teacher association (PTA) meetings were also restricted during COVID-19 lockdowns, Read Liberia provided virtual support to PTA members and encouraged PTAs to take the lead in supporting early grade reading activities in their communities. Community Mobilization Officers and School Community Mobilizers also held virtual meetings with community-based organizations, including youth and women's groups, who agreed to encourage parents to use their Read Liberia books and lessons while schools were closed. Community leaders used their existing communication channels to air Read Liberia messages during social functions.

6. Monitoring, evaluation, and action research

Read Liberia's traditional in-person data collection and reporting system was challenged by the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In response, the Read Liberia monitoring, evaluation, and learning (ME&L) team adopted virtual and mobile phone data collection methods. The ME&L team developed a virtual monitoring and reporting framework, using freely available but secure Google Sheets for monitoring and verification to complement its data collection and reporting in RTI's Tangerine® application.

Additionally, coaches (with the teachers' consent) recorded all virtual coaching sessions to document coaching calls. Both Tangerine files and recorded audio files were then emailed to coach supervisors and the ME&L team. Coaches also provided weekly teacher support updates to the MOE and District Education Officers by phone, sharing lessons they were learning and how they were mitigating challenges. This collaboration with the MOE proved very useful in maintaining continuous teacher participation.

In June 2020, Read Liberia undertook a Teaching by Radio impact evaluation to better understand the extent to which School Community Mobilizers were able to get messages to parents. Targeted phone interviews were undertaken with parents, who shared how they accessed the radio programs, their group listening habits, and the resulting changes in their behavior, such as making time for children's reading at home. The results of this research were used to inform the MOE's Teaching by Radio program and help plan for the return to face-to-face learning.

More Information:

The USAID Read Liberia Activity is a five-year (September 2017–September 2022) program that aims at improving early grade reading skills for Liberian students in 640 public schools in grades 1 and 2. Read Liberia also pilot tested a program to develop emergent literacy skills for Liberian students in 60 public kindergarten schools. The Activity is implemented in six targeted counties—Lofa, Bong, Grand Bassa, Nimba, Margibi, and Montserrado. Read Liberia is funded by USAID and implemented by RTI International with subcontractors Another Option, Brattle Publishing Group, and Diversified Educators Empowerment Program (DEEP) through direct partnership with the Liberian MOE.

USAID/Liberia

Read Liberia Activity

Chief of Party: Trokon Wayne

This report is made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) under the Read Liberia Activity. The contents are the responsibility of RTI International and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.