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Early Primary Literacy Instruction in Kenya

MARGARET M. DUBECK, MATTHEW C. H. JUKES, AND GEORGE OKELLO

We report on a study that used observations, conversations, and formal interviews to explore literacy instruction in 24 lower-primary classrooms in coastal Kenya. Specifically, we report the ways literacy instruction is delivered and how that delivery aligns with practices understood to promote reading acquisition. We find (1) prioritization of developing oral language skills over teaching the relationships between sounds and symbols, (2) enablers to literacy instruction that are the result of teachers' efforts, and (3) constraints to successful literacy instruction as perceived by the teachers. We identify challenges and opportunities to improve literacy instruction in English and Swahili.

Introduction

Across sub-Saharan Africa, literacy levels for primary schoolchildren are low (UNESCO 2010). Issues such as poor health, poverty, and limited access to print likely contribute to delayed reading acquisition, and even highly trained teachers are likely to struggle in these challenging settings (Glewwe and Kremer 2006). We do not expect classroom teachers to change these complex contextual issues that have been shown to influence academic achievement (Heath 1983; Badian 1988; Jukes et al. 2008). We can, however, support classroom teachers to provide instruction that is aligned with current understandings for promoting successful literacy acquisition (Snow et al. 1998; NICHHD 2000; August and Shanahan 2006). Teachers face many challenges to their teaching. Our question concerns the potential for improved instruction to facilitate reading achievement in the context of these challenges.

Recent research has shown that poor early literacy achievement is a problem that spans continents, and the contributing factors may be similar across settings (Gove and Cvelich 2010). Therefore, we aim to understand literacy instruction in early primary classrooms in coastal Kenya in the hope that the

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findings may be useful to other countries with similar attributes. Extending from Michelle Commeyras and Hellen Inyega's (2007) overview of teaching reading in Kenya, which suggested exploration of instructional methods, we observed the interactions between teachers and students and conducted interviews to explore the intent and perceived limitations of the reading instruction. Such information can inform interventions aiming to improve the quality of literacy instruction.

Literacy Instruction

The effectiveness of educators while teaching reading varies (Pressley et al. 2001; Stuhlman and Pianta 2009), but students do best when literacy skills are taught in systematic, explicit, and appropriate ways (Snow et al. 1998). Studies of teachers in a variety of settings suggest that teachers' literacy instruction and perceptions of students' abilities influence classroom practices and student achievement (McMahon et al. 1998). Research also shows that students of teachers who possess a high level of self-efficacy—a belief in one's ability to improve one's students' learning—achieve at higher learning rates than students who are not taught by such teachers (Pressley et al. 2001).

A number of different methods exist to teach beginning reading. For example, *phonics* involves instruction in reading and spelling that stresses letter-sound relationships, *look-say* instruction involves looking at the entire word and saying it, and *whole language* instruction encourages students to select their own reading material and emphasizes recognizing words in context. However, as Jeanne Chall (1967) concluded over 40 years ago, and comprehensive reviews of the literature have repeatedly supported (NICHD 2000; August and Shanahan 2006), the most effective beginning reading instruction includes phonics that emphasizes meaning, language, and connected text. This practice is sometimes called a *balanced approach* (Pressley 1998).

A teacher's choice of method depends on a number of factors. A method may be used because it is familiar to the teacher (Hillman et al. 2006; Farrell 2008), is mandated by a funding source (Salinger 2006), or is known to be less than optimal but is used to manage logistical constraints (NICHD ECCRN 2004). For example, a teacher may have a class that is so large that she cannot offer individualized instruction to her struggling readers, even though she recognizes its importance. Finally, it appears that teachers' knowledge about the way literacy develops helps to determine their instructional practice (McCutchen et al. 2002).

Teachers who understand the way reading develops can offer explicit and systematic instruction to their students. *Explicit* means that the concept is directly taught and modeled so the student does not have to infer what the teacher means. *Systematic* instruction progresses in a sequence moving from easiest to most difficult. Although a balanced approach to literacy instruction

is recommended, one component of it—teaching the relationship between sounds and symbols (i.e., letters)—is essential for preventing reading difficulties. Since neglecting this type of instruction is likely to have serious consequences for many children’s literacy development, we examined the extent to which children in Kenya are instructed in this way.

Among other skills, teaching sound-to-symbol relationships, phonological awareness, and comprehension has been shown to reduce reading difficulties (Vellutino and Scanlon 1987; August and Shanahan 2006) and increase reading achievement in the United States (NICHD 2000). Teachers in countries such as Canada (Lesaux and Siegel 2003), Greece (Loizou and Stuart 2003), and Israel (Abu-Rabia and Siegel 2003) devote instructional time to these literacy skills as well. Despite the growing consensus that promotes the development of literacy skills in a systematic and explicit manner, educators in some developing countries are just beginning to teach skills that are known to reduce reading difficulties (Anderson-Levitt 2004; Rwanyong et al. 2005).

Although research on reading instruction is limited in developing countries, we believe that effective literacy methods from other countries, and in other languages, are likely to apply to Kenya. For one, we are considering fundamental reading processes, which are hypothesized to be universal across writing systems (Perfetti 2003). Furthermore, the similarities within a particular writing system, such as an alphabetic one, support using research across settings.

All languages have thousands of unique words, but they only have a few dozen phonemes (i.e., sounds). In alphabetic languages, such as English and Swahili, letters represents those sounds. Learning to read any alphabetic system depends on understanding the relationship between sounds and the letters that represent them (Adams 1990). Regardless of context, students who do not have this insight are likely to struggle with reading.

It is important to understand teachers’ instructional methods and their orientation to literacy before any interventions can be suggested. Numerous studies using various measures have investigated teachers’ literacy practices and perceptions. Some have examined teachers’ literacy instructional practices (Baumann et al. 2000; Rimm-Kaufman et al. 2006) as well as their beliefs about how literacy should develop (Smith and Croom 2000). Other studies have examined perceptions of student literacy acquisition (McMahon et al. 1998) and how the student embraces literacy (Sweet et al. 1998). These studies designed or used existing measures relevant to the research conditions in which they were used but may not be applicable to other settings.

Kenyan Context

The Kenyan Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) exam provides evidence of enrolled student academic achievement at the end of grade 8. However, less than half the students who begin primary school in Kenya

reach grade 8 to take the KCPE exam (Ackers et al. 2001; Muthwii 2004). Research from other countries (Alexander et al. 1997; Jimerson et al. 2000) suggests that weak reading skills may contribute to students' dropping out of school.

The Southern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality assessment project provides some information about Kenyan students' reading abilities. It found that 21 percent of sixth grade students reached a *desirable level* of reading (i.e., guaranteed to cope with the next year of schooling), and 66 percent reached the designated *minimum level* (i.e., would barely survive during the next year of schooling; Onsomu et al. 2005). The foundational literacy skills needed to be successful on these late primary school exams are taught in the early primary grades. Therefore, in an attempt to improve instructional practice that will enhance student performance, we need a better understanding of the methods Kenyan teachers currently use.

The Kenyan national education policy specifies the use of the *mother tongue* (i.e., the local language spoken in a student's home) as the language of instruction in grades 1–3 and states that English should be used in grade 4 and thereafter. Swahili (i.e., Kiswahili) is Kenya's national language and the lingua franca of the region and is taught as a subject to all students starting in grade 1. Although the language-of-instruction policy appears to be clear, practical implementation is less straightforward. A lack of instructional materials in the mother tongue and a concern that students who do not begin instruction in English upon school entry will be disadvantaged when they take exit exams combine to increase the use of English in the early primary grades (Muthwii 2004; Commeyras and Inyega 2007). Since this is the period of schooling when students learn to read, the interpretation and (non)application of the language policy is related to the policies on teaching reading. Furthermore, because of the uncertainty of the way in which the language policy is implemented and its importance to reading acquisition, we want to explore how teachers interpret it.

Kenya's education policy does not mandate a specific method of teaching reading. Instead, the policy suggests that the teaching methods should meet the students' learning needs and the objective for the lesson (Ministry of Education 2006). Generally, these methods could include teaching the relationships between the letters and their sound (i.e., phonics), teaching words as a whole (i.e., look-say), or a combination of these techniques. Commeyras and Inyega (2007) provide an informative review of the approaches that some Kenyan teachers use. However, many of the studies they reviewed were conducted 20 years ago, so they may not still be applicable. The current investigation explores how Kenyan teachers follow and interpret language and literacy instructional policies in their classrooms located in the Coast Province of Kenya, a region that has not been reported in the literature.

This article attempts to answer three questions. First, how are children

taught to read in English and Swahili? Second, how does this literacy instruction align with the current state of knowledge (largely from Western countries) on providing beginning reading instruction? Third, what underlying factors enable and constrain instructional practices? Within these questions, we examine teacher perceptions of reading acquisition, allocation of resources, logistical issues, and multilingualism.

Procedures

Site

All the public schools that we visited were located in small towns or rural villages in a district in the Coast Province of Kenya. The district was identified by the Ministry of Education as a good site for our research because of its poor performance on the test given to students at the end of primary school (the KCPE). The district is ranked as the seventh poorest of 76 districts in the country and second poorest of the seven districts in the Coast Province (RTI International 2008).

A related health project randomly selected 25 primary schools from the district pool of 299. We joined the health survey team to conduct our observations and interviews with 40 teachers in 24 of those schools (missing one because of a transportation issue). Some schools were located on a paved road ($n = 3$), some were 1–10 kilometers from the paved road ($n = 12$), and others were more than 10 kilometers from the paved road ($n = 9$). Two schools were in towns with populations over 5,000, while the rest served villages with smaller populations. Most of the classrooms had the same physical design: three windows on one wall; two on the opposite wall, which also hosted the door; and a chalkboard on the front wall. Over half the classrooms had cement floors rather than exposed earth floors, and nearly all classrooms had desks that were shared by three to four students.

Since abolishing school fees in 2003, Kenyan primary school enrollment has increased by 28 percent, from 5.9 to 7.6 million between 2002 and 2005 (UNESCO 2006). (Fees for kindergarten have not been eliminated, nor is attendance compulsory, so first grade is the first formal school setting for many children.) To maintain instruction quality, lower-primary streams (sections in grades 1–3) are officially capped at 40 students, but increased demand, combined with limited resources, means that a teacher teaches one, two, or three streams simultaneously. So in effect, lower-primary classes range from 40 to 120 students in the same room.

Participants

The teachers whom we interviewed or observed (28 females; 12 males) represent a sample of the grade 1 or 2 teachers in the 24 schools that we visited. We met with at least one teacher at each school. Many of them were from the coastal region ($n = 32$), but some had moved there as adults ($n =$

8). All of them have experience teaching grade 1 or 2: grades in which children are often still learning to read. Teachers were invited to participate by the researchers.

The profiles of participant teachers varied. Nearly all of them had some formal teacher training. The most qualified had achieved Approved Teacher Status ($n = 5$), which requires graduating from a teacher training college and exhibiting high teaching ability, as well as earning certificates after a preservice teacher training program and a set exam to determine which of the three levels (P1, P2, or P3) they had achieved. Although few teachers had achieved Approved Teacher Status, most of the teachers did possess a certificate ($n = 33$). One teacher whom we interviewed and another whom we observed had no formal teacher training, but they had completed secondary school (12 years of formal schooling). The participants' years of teaching experience ranged from 1 to 30 years, with 17 teachers having taught for at least 11 years. A Mijikenda dialect (e.g., Digo, Duruma, or another Bantu language spoken in coastal Kenya) was the mother tongue for 32 of the teachers. Another Kenyan language (e.g., Kikuyu, Meru) was the mother tongue of the other eight teachers. Neither English nor Swahili was the first language of any teacher involved in this study.

Interviews and Observations

Our findings come from 24 classroom observations with immediate debriefing conversations and 22 formal interviews in 24 schools during October and November 2008. In total, we gathered information from 40 teachers. The classroom visits were timed so that the first author, a native English speaker with minimal Swahili skills, observed grade 1 or 2 literacy instruction in English and Swahili. She spent the entire school day observing instruction, interspersed with postobservation conversations with all 24 teachers. To capture as much information as possible, she combined a narrative approach, recording all events chronologically, with a researcher-created observation protocol to ensure that the same features were documented in each classroom. The protocol was similar to existing instruments, such as the TEX-IN3 (Hoffman et al. 2004) and the ELLCO (Smith et al. 2002), that measure effectiveness of the classroom literacy environment by examining such elements as text available for instruction and text used in instruction. The third author, a Kenyan, conducted all the formal interviews in English or Swahili at a convenient time for the teachers in a place without distractions. If the observed teacher was not available due to illness or a professional commitment, another teacher working with the observed teacher was interviewed.

Teachers were interviewed with predominantly open-ended questions to allow them to report their experiences in their own words and to have more control over the direction of conversation (see questions listed in the appendix, available in the online version of *CER*). Furthermore, this approach

allowed us to explain our terminology since some terms can acquire meanings unique to their place of use. For example, the term *choral reading* in the United States implies that all the students have their eyes on the text, perhaps with their index finger underneath it, and are reading the text collectively. Kenyan teachers also assume that the entire class is reciting, but they do not stress that the students follow the text with their eyes and fingers. Meaning shifts like this could be expected, so open-ended interview questions allowed us to clarify and confirm responses. Teachers also responded to a series of closed-ended demographic questions (e.g., language background, years teaching).

A short letter, written in English, was presented to each participant before each interview to explain its purpose and the approximate time it required. Furthermore, the letter advised teachers that participation was voluntary and provided contact information if participants had questions or comments. All interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder and transcribed for analysis. Responses were primarily in English, and Swahili sections were translated into English by the third author.

We used several methods to interpret the data. The classroom observations and postobservation conversations preceded the formal interviews by several days to 2 weeks. This arrangement allowed us to check with some participants to determine whether our initial interpretations of the observations were correct. In addition, by following observations with conversations and then with formal interviews before returning to the literature, we could triangulate our data sources to increase the validity of our findings. With our initial findings clarified, we used NVivo 8 software as a tool to identify trends and common themes.

Our analysis looked at the teachers as the unit of analysis. We used focused coding, beginning with codes related to our initial questions about literacy and adding themes as they emerged from the data. We wanted to explore how teachers instructed, how their instruction aligned with the policies and research, and how they managed perceived obstacles to develop their students' literacy skills. Additionally, we were interested in Kathryn Anderson-Levitt's (2004, 235) question when she compared reading lessons in other countries: "How do educators claim that initial reading instruction ought to be conducted, and how do they actually conduct it?"

Findings

Through the classroom observations and the interview data, we documented characteristics of reading instruction in coastal Kenya. First, we noted that oral language instruction is prioritized, with minimal time devoted to teaching relationships between sounds and letters. Second, we found factors related to teachers' behavior that enable their literacy instruction. Conversely, we identified factors that may constrain their literacy instruction.

Oral Language Instruction Is Prioritized

The first and second grade reading instruction that we observed emphasized oral language skills. In nearly every English lesson and frequently in Swahili lessons, we saw reading of whole words taken from the textbook with extensive choral repetition. The curriculum for these grades identifies a list of reading skills that the students should acquire (Ministry of Education 2006). One identified reading skill within the curriculum is “*word recognition*: pupils learn to recognize the written words and read them” (57). The curriculum suggests several methods to develop word recognition (e.g., look-say, phonics), but we found that word recognition skills were taught primarily by emphasizing oral language skills through repetition. When asked about teaching beginning reading, one teacher’s response was informative: “We just pronounce the word and then you also allow the children to say [it] while listening to them so that they pronounce it in the right way.”

The structure of instructional methods was similar across schools. Typically, a short sentence using a new word(s) was written on the chalkboard (e.g., “It is a cup” or “They are cups”). The teacher then read the sentence and asked the class to repeat it, which the majority of students did. To support students’ understanding, teachers frequently drew pictures of the objects or had the actual objects to display. The exchange below typifies the use of choral repetition in a first grade classroom. We rarely saw the teacher point to accompanying written text or remind students to look at the sentences written on the board.

- TEACHER: Displays a cup and asks, “What is this?”
 STUDENTS: “It is a cup.” (Four times chorally, after prompts of “Again”)
 TEACHER: Displays two cups and asks, “What are these?”
 STUDENTS: “They are cups.” (10 times chorally)
 TEACHER: Removes one cup, shrugs shoulders and asks, “Class?”
 STUDENTS: “It is a cup.” (Five times chorally)
 TEACHER: Displays a spoon and asks, “What is this?”
 STUDENTS: “It is a spoon.” (10 times chorally)
 TEACHER: Displays a second spoon and asks, “What are these?”
 STUDENTS: “They are spoons.” (10 times chorally)

Teachers also used a word detection task comparable to a cloze technique (Radice 1978). In almost every class, we observed teachers using a similar technique, varying by the amount of picture or text support only. For example, the teacher would read a complete sentence, such as, “He is working on the *shamba* [farm in Swahili],” and then ask students to echo it. Then the teacher would repeat the sentence but this time leave off a word for the students to provide (“He is working on the . . .”) and then pause for the students to say “*shamba*.” Some students responded correctly, some mumbled the wrong word, and some did not participate. Although the sentence may have been written on the chalkboard or written in the textbook, students

were not reminded—by the teacher’s physical actions or words—to look at it.

Teachers stated that they felt a responsibility to follow the established curricula in English and Swahili. For instance, one teacher told us: “With the rules, they say oral work-vocabulary, oral work-sentence patterns. We have reading of passages, which emphasizes the new words in the sentence patterns. When you go by that, you find yourself finishing the syllabus on time.” Some teachers developed their own activities to teach oral vocabulary to increase student understanding. One experienced teacher began an activity by marching in a narrow circle and singing, “I’m walking in the game park.” The students were obviously familiar with this activity because they immediately rose from their seats and began to march too. Then the teacher repeated the first line and added a question, “I’m walking in the game park, and what did I see?” The students continued to march while waiting for the teacher to say an animal. Once she did, the students repeated the animal’s name and did an accompanying gesture to represent it (e.g., putting their arms below their noses to represent a trunk when the teacher said “elephant”). The students were engaged in this activity, and the simultaneous movement and repetition also likely helped develop their oral vocabularies (Beck et al. 2002).

Research elsewhere suggests that oral language experiences aid literacy acquisition, but they are especially important for students who are learning to speak the language of instruction (August and Shanahan 2006). In this case, students are learning both English and Swahili. A supportive language environment helps students acquire vocabulary and language skills. However, developing oral language is most effective in teaching reading skills if children’s attention is also drawn to the text representation of the new word (Snow et al. 1998).

Teachers repeatedly told us that most of their students were not becoming independent readers of English. Some of the teachers identified phonics, teaching the relationships between letters and sounds, as a missing element in their instruction. The following comments show how they valued phonics. “You see it is easier for the child to read when they know the sounds. They will be able to read the simple words, and this also makes it easier for them to read the simple sentences. Sounds are very important.” “The moment they acquire skills on sounds, their problem is solved.”

Despite this appreciation, many teachers did not include phonics because they followed the curriculum, which indicated that letter-sound relationships should be taught in kindergarten (which is not compulsory or free) and not in first or second grade: “So the syllabus [grade 1] doesn’t accommodate teaching of sounds. It assumes that the work is done in nursery school [i.e., kindergarten].” Alternatively, they did not include phonics because it was not included in their materials. As grade 1 teachers commented, “I just teach

whole words. There are no materials for teaching sounds.” “Phonics is not in the books that I use.” Some, such as the following grade 2 teachers, did not teach English phonics because they did not remember it from teacher training. “You see so many years have passed, and that is why we are telling you that you have to remind us on some of these things [phonics].” “Personally, I think I have a problem in teaching sounds. and so if that is something more emphasis can be put on, I will be comfortable.” Some teachers indicated that they did not include it because they were not trained in how to do so, as explained by grade 1 and grade 2 teachers, respectively: “I teach whole words. That one you are calling phonics . . . I have never come across a teacher who taught me those things.” “The problem lies in college; we were never trained well on teaching [phonics]. I only know the look-say method, and that is what I use. So if you train me on those similar skills [i.e., phonics] that would help me a great deal.”

The teachers we interviewed understood the importance of teaching English letter-sound correspondences because similar instructional methods underpinned their Swahili instruction. Although Swahili instruction attends to syllables, and English phonics begins with individual sounds, explicit instruction in both languages shows students how letters represent speech, and this insight enables students to read and write unfamiliar words independently (Villaume and Brabham 2003). Teachers recognized that their students were better readers of Swahili, and showing students how the syllabic nature worked was a potential explanation. As one grade 2 teacher explained, “In Kiswahili they can [read] because the syllables are easier. . . . You know that when you combine ‘ba’ and ‘ba’ you will get ‘baba’ [‘father’ in Swahili].” And another said, “They can read. For instance, Kamau they would read as Ka-ma-u, which I think is a good thing.”

We noted explicit Swahili instruction in several classrooms. For example, classrooms were more likely to post charts showing how to combine Swahili syllables to form words (e.g., ba + bu = babu) than to post charts of English vowel sounds or word families (e.g., black, stack, tack). One teacher whom we observed wrote individual Swahili words on the chalkboard and worked through each word with the same procedure. The teacher touched the first syllable with a long pointer, said the syllable, and asked students to repeat it. The teacher then touched the second syllable, said it, and asked the students to repeat it. Next, the teacher ran the pointer under both syllables and told the students to combine them. After each word, the teacher praised the students and clarified the Swahili words in English or the mother tongue. This instruction was explicit because it showed students how to combine word parts to read words (Stahl and Nagy 2006). When students encounter a different combination of syllables, they will likely be able to use this knowledge to read words independently.

Early primary classrooms typically have eager students (Lepper et al.

2005), and students participate when the reading instruction is matched to their needs (Connor et al. 2009). We noticed that more students participated in Swahili instruction than in English instruction. We speculate that providing explicit Swahili instruction helped the teacher monitor student understanding and, therefore, match the instruction to students' needs.

Enablers to Literacy Instruction

We observed four factors that seemed to enable effective literacy instruction. Specifically, teacher efforts in grouping students, manipulating the schedule, professional development, and supplementing classroom resources all appeared to enable their literacy instruction.

Class sizes ranged from 40 to 120 students. To manage the large numbers, most teachers arranged students in groups, which have been shown to facilitate student literacy achievement when arranged by mixed or same-level ability, depending on the task (Pressley et al. 2001). Nearly a third ($n = 7$) of the teachers we observed put students of similar (perceived) abilities together because they believed homogenous groups would be helpful for the struggling readers. One grade 1 teacher stated: "You see, I was told that it was not the best method, but I found that even though you have isolated them from the others, you can help more." Other grade 1 teachers echo this point, adding that it aided in classroom management: "I have discovered that when we mix the bright students and the slow learners, the slow learners will not read." "When I took over this class, they were weak, and so I had to look at ways in which I could handle them. So I have grouped them according to their reading abilities."

In contrast, more than half the teachers we met used mixed-ability grouping. They cited classroom management and student learning needs as their motivations for using this approach. For instance, the following grade 1 teachers commented: "We have realized that when we mix the weak and the strong students, they help one another, and we have seen some improvements in them." "At first, I grouped them according to their abilities, but I came to realize later on that it is the weak ones who were losing because their performance kept on going down. So I have mixed them."

A small number of teachers ($n = 5$) used both homogenous and heterogeneous groups, depending on the lesson. Ability grouping allowed teachers to assist students with similar needs simultaneously; some teachers did not use it exclusively because they were concerned about student self-perception. As one grade 2 teacher observed, "At times we do it according to their abilities, and at times we mix them. Because when you group according to abilities, they will know, so I mix them." We also saw teachers follow homogeneous groups with ephemeral mixed-ability groups based on interests. In one class, students' food preferences determined group membership, and the new groups answered a few oral questions. Within minutes, these food-

based groups disbanded, and new groups were created determined by color preferences. This creative grouping demonstrated teacher adaptability.

The second enabler that we identified was manipulation of the daily schedule to address students' needs. For example, some teachers tutored struggling students individually or in small groups in the early morning, after school, or during lunch. Moreover, some teachers devoted extra time to help students understand a topic before moving to a more difficult one. As a grade 2 teacher explained, "You can also plan to teach something on a particular day, but then again, you come to realize that it is too technical. . . . It will force you to change so that you teach something else or even revise what you had taught earlier because you can't move on when the child has not understood something."

The third enabler that we observed involved teacher participation in professional development activities. Although all but two of the teachers were formally trained, many continued to seek further learning. They recognized that they could benefit from review or that the methods that they had learned in their preservice teacher training courses may have changed. For example, a grade 1 teacher stated: "What we learned isn't final, and people keep on learning." Another grade 1 teacher commented: "But you see we have forgotten about some of these things, and this is why refresher courses are important."

Teachers also expanded their professional knowledge by collaborating with colleagues. Following some of the observations, the first author modeled instructional methods. Often during these spontaneous demonstrations, the listening teacher requested a brief interruption to invite her colleagues so they could learn the new methods too. We also observed how teachers shared ideas acquired in teacher training sessions. For example, several teachers learned the instructional benefits of using classroom centers (e.g., the Reading Corner, the Class Store), designed for students to work independently or in small groups, and shared that knowledge with their colleagues who had not attended the training. As a result, we saw classroom centers being used by teachers who had not attended the training, in a total of six classrooms.

Previous research has shown that classrooms with more print resources provide more support for the beginning reader (Neuman 2004). Although all the classrooms we observed had enough English and Swahili textbooks for students to use alone or to share with a classmate or two, the amount of environmental print—visible and available text to support reading acquisition—varied greatly. This variation depended on how much material was made by the teacher and was the fourth enabler to instruction that we noted.

The most common instructional support for literacy involved labeled drawings grouped by category (e.g., animals, shapes). The alphabet was displayed in some classrooms ($n = 6$). Calendars or days of the week were displayed in slightly more classrooms ($n = 7$). Displaying information that

explained the way English and Swahili orthography worked was observed in a limited number of classrooms. Two classrooms displayed lists of words grouped by beginning consonants (e.g., bag, blue). The same number of classrooms displayed posters that grouped words by vowel sounds (e.g., feed, meet). More classrooms ($n = 7$) displayed common Swahili syllable patterns (e.g., ba, be, bi, bo, bu) and showed how syllables combine to make a word (e.g., ba + bu = babu). When asked about the origin of the Swahili posters, one grade 1 teacher said the idea was “taken from the Kiswahili textbook.”

Some teachers explained the minimal print resources by saying that it was difficult to keep anything affixed to the walls. Other teachers solved this problem by securing a line of string across the room to hang posters using clips. Another solved it by using glue made of flour and water. The few print-rich classrooms that we observed were those of teachers who used string or flour glue. They were distinguished by displaying between 10 and 30 print resources (e.g., labeled drawings, alphabets, calendars, Swahili patterns) to support instruction. Another teacher-created support that we saw was a talking tree—a meter-long tree branch planted in a can with English or Swahili word cards hanging from it like fruit.

Constraints to Reading Acquisition

Teachers cited myriad factors as constraints to their literacy instruction, yet within that diversity, nearly all teachers cited the same three factors: student absenteeism, lack of parental support, and the presence of multiple spoken languages in the region. As some of the following comments suggest, these factors are interrelated.

The teachers frequently mentioned student absenteeism as a reason for low literacy levels. One grade 2 teacher was concerned that it leads to education gaps: “Then the other problem is absenteeism. You teach something when such a child is away from school, and so when he comes back to school, he has no idea about it all.” Some teachers saw health problems as a cause of absenteeism, but more teachers, such as this grade 1 teacher, perceived absenteeism to be a parental problem: “Cases of absenteeism are also common. They only come to school for 3 days in a week and then disappear for another 2 days, and when you demand an explanation, they [the families] won’t give you any meaningful explanation. It comes back to these parents because they do not push their children to come to school or encourage them to learn how to read and write.”

Nearly all of the teachers identified parents as a constraint.¹ Specifically, they were faulted for not supporting their children, as the following grade 2 teachers suggested: “They [the parents] are not supportive, and, in fact,

¹ Although many teachers perceived parents as a problem, not all did. For instance, one grade 2 teacher commented: “I can say that there are some who are supportive. But these were the parents of the students who are already sharp.”

in most cases they don't even bother." "They [the students] are not motivated by their parents." Some teachers perceived the lack of parental support to be the result of illiteracy. For example, one grade 2 teacher explained: "It is the lack of support from parents. You see most of the parents here—I am not sure if I should use this word—are illiterate. So they don't help us that much."

Multilingualism was a third factor that teachers perceived as a constraint to successful literacy acquisition. During postobservation conversations and formal interviews, teachers consistently identified language issues as a reason their students struggled with reading. However, the ways teachers managed those language issues were diverse.

Language in coastal Kenya is a complex issue. Even though the national policy states otherwise, the language of instruction in lower-primary classrooms is frequently English, the lingua franca is Swahili, and the students and teachers use a variety of mother tongues.² English is used in all first and second grade term exams (e.g., mathematics, religion), except for the Swahili exam. The primary school schedule devotes time daily for mother tongue instruction, but, partially due to a lack of instructional materials, all the teachers we met replaced it with an extra section of English or Swahili.

Some teachers felt that English should take priority over other languages. Enforcement of the schools' language policy was a way some grade 2 teachers showed their support for English, as illustrated by the following quotes. "We also emphasize that they speak in English, and anybody who breaks this rule is punished." "Our children could be speaking in English, but you see at times, when outside class, you don't hear them speaking in English. They speak in their languages, and so that policy isn't [being followed] there." A grade 1 teacher described how she used persistence to promote the use of English:

They were using their mother tongue. And you see I am not a Digo [i.e., one who speaks Kidigo], and so I kept on wondering how I would teach them. You would ask them what a cup is, and then they respond in their local language. After that, if you are teaching English, you have to tell them that this is a "cup." Then you can ask them other questions, like where a cup is found, its uses, and that becomes a learning process. You therefore have to constantly use the word cup in English and not as they say it in their local language.

Some teachers used a mixed approach to develop language. Typically, they combined Swahili with English. As one grade 2 teacher said, "Then you realize that they do not understand English; you switch to Kiswahili." Some teachers discussed their willingness to use more Swahili but found the first language interfered: "Even when you try talking to them in Kiswahili, they respond in mother tongue." Other teachers used a triad of languages to

² Recall that there were nine different mother tongues among the 40 teachers we interviewed, which only sometimes aligned with their students' mother tongues.

reach their students: “I use English and also translate to them in Kiswahili. When they don’t understand at all, I switch to the local language . . . Kiburuma.” Still other teachers expressed a willingness to use the local mother tongue but did not because they did not know it: “[I use] English and Kiswahili because I don’t know Kiburuma.” Another group of teachers expressed a willingness to use the mother tongue but did not do so because of the heterogeneity of languages in their classrooms: “We can’t use the local language here because we have different tribes here. If we use Kiburuma, then obviously some of them will not understand.”

Teachers are aware of the national language instruction policy promoting the mother tongue, even though they may not follow it. The lack of instructional materials discourages teachers from using the mother tongue. Others do not use it because their schools have English-only language policies. These policies seem to have developed out of a concern for all students’ success on the school’s internal exams (e.g., mathematics, religion), which begin in lower primary, and the eighth grade exit exams, which determine who passes onto secondary school. All these exams, with the exception of the Swahili subject exam, are written in English.

Conclusion

Our research focused on literacy instruction in coastal Kenya. The teachers we met identified barriers to improving children’s reading achievement. Our goal was not to explore ways to tackle these barriers but rather focused specifically on the potential for improved instruction to be more effective in this context. Our first two research questions considered the nature of the methods and how they align with what is known about effective literacy instruction, that is, systematically and explicitly teaching the relationship between letters and sounds. In the schools we observed, we found an emphasis on developing oral language skills supplemented by limited opportunities for students to interact with text and a deficiency in teaching letter-sound relationships in English. Some teachers showed students how to combine syllables in Swahili.

Our findings also identified teachers’ actions that enabled literacy instruction. Specifically, we found that teachers grouped students, readjusted the daily schedule, sought professional development opportunities, and made instructional resources. Additionally, we identified elements that teachers perceived to constrain children’s literacy development: student absenteeism, lack of parental capacity and support, and language policies.

In this context, we believe that there are opportunities to influence the instruction in ways that could have a substantial impact on children’s literacy. First, the inclusion of letter-sound relationships in textbooks could help promote effective instruction, particularly in English. The Kenyan Ministry of Education curriculum recognizes multiple methods (e.g., look-say, phonics,

sentences) for reading instruction and advises teachers “to integrate the methods so that one can teach effectively” (Ministry of Education 2006, 61). In explaining the phonics method, the syllabus reads “to equip the learners with the skill of reading independently . . . pupils are taught these relationships systematically” (62–63). The teachers we met currently use the content of the English and Swahili textbooks to guide their instruction. Since the Swahili textbook shows how to merge syllables to make words, some teachers demonstrate to students how to combine word parts to read new words. Teachers also told us that they want to show their students the relationships between English letters and sounds, but most do not do so because this approach is not included in the textbooks. Research strongly supports systematic and explicit phonics instruction as a means for promoting reading achievement (Snow et al. 1998; NICHHD 2000). Including the relationships between letters and sounds in the English textbooks would likely encourage teachers to instruct this way.

Second, the focus on oral language development could be supplemented by increased opportunities to interact with text. Developing oral language is necessary for word-level skills and comprehension (Roth et al. 2002). It is especially important for students who do not have a command of a language to learn sentence structures and to build a complex vocabulary. The current attention to oral language that we observed would be complemented by instruction that systematically teaches students the relationships between letters and sounds with increased opportunities to interact with connected text. A considerable body of research supports this approach as a way to prevent reading difficulties for students learning to read in their first (NICHHD 2000) or additional languages (August and Shanahan 2006). When instruction teaches oral language and letter-sound relationships in concert with other skills (e.g., comprehension and fluency), students have a foundation to become independent readers and writers. We found that some teachers created their own materials to provide a print-rich environment. Thus, there is potential to increase the amount of print available in the classroom and, thus, the amount of interaction with print.

The complexity of the language situation also creates challenges for literacy acquisition. The Ministry of Education’s policy of starting reading instruction in a child’s mother tongue before transitioning to additional languages is supported in the literature (August and Shanahan 2006). However, the lack of instructional materials in the mother tongues decreases the likelihood that teachers will devote time to using them in the classroom, particularly given that not all teachers are fluent in the local language of the children they teach.

According to teacher reports, their students generally read better in Swahili than in English. The literature suggests that students’ Swahili proficiency could be used to benefit their English skills. Some evidence suggests that

early exposure to a language with a transparent orthography—a language with a high sound-to-symbol correspondence (e.g., Swahili, Italian)—may facilitate the development of phonological awareness and reading in a language with a more opaque orthography, with a lower sound-to-symbol correspondence (e.g., English, Serbo-Croatian; see D’Angiulli et al. 2001; Abu-Rabia and Siegel 2002). Related work shows that cognitive skills that are available to support literacy in one language seem to be available in other languages as well (Durgunoglu 2002), so the student who has attained a literacy concept in one language can be guided to learn how that concept works in the additional language. This idea could be explained to teachers, administrators, and policy makers. If such insights were part of the standard body of knowledge possessed by all teachers on the coast, they would be encouraged by their students’ progress in their mother tongue and Swahili and recognize the potential to build on this progress to improve English reading.

We acknowledge limitations of our study and in the identified areas for opportunities to improve reading instruction. Our observations, follow-up conversations, and formal interviews were based on a small sample of schools in one district in Kenya that has a history of poor educational indicators. It is possible that some of our suggestions would not be relevant to other areas of the country with more successful learning outcomes, and certainly one should be cautious about the relevance of the lessons learned for other nations and continents.

In conclusion, evidence suggests that not enough Kenyan students have the necessary literacy skills to be successful in the upper-primary grades (Onsomu et al. 2005). Many more Kenyan students drop out of school before they could be included in these evaluations. It is conceivable that if these dropouts had been better readers, they might have remained in school. One way to ameliorate this problem is to consider the literacy instruction students receive and identify areas for improvement. The current study represents an attempt to understand how early primary literacy instruction in coastal Kenya is delivered and how that delivery aligns with practices understood to promote reading acquisition. Moreover, it compiles the perceptions of the teachers delivering the instruction—what they see as impediments and ways they adapt. Ultimately, it considers the potential for teachers to improve instruction so that they can enhance their students’ literacy development.

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