



# LESSONS IN LITERACY



**Save the Children**

**8 principles to ensure every last child can read**  
**Executive Summary**

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Imagine a world where every last child can read

Over the last several decades the world has made incredible progress in getting children into school. However, there is more work to be done to ensure that every child is learning. While the focus on access to school has been important, it has been prioritised over educational quality, leading to what UNESCO and others have termed a 'global learning crisis'. This crisis has meant that 250 million children are left behind, 130 million of whom cannot read despite completing four years of education.<sup>1</sup> For these children, not learning to read in their early years will limit their options and opportunities for a lifetime.

Literacy is also essential to tackling a broad range of critical development issues. It has been estimated that if all children in low-income countries left school with basic reading skills, 171 million people could be lifted out of poverty, equivalent to a 12 per cent reduction in poverty worldwide.<sup>2</sup> The ability to read is positively associated with better health, higher income and economic growth, and exercise of rights. Enabling every child to read will help tackle inequities by ensuring that regardless of gender, ethnicity, race, disability or socio-economic background, every child starts out with a basic skillset with which to take on life's challenges.

Between now and 2030, there is an opportunity to take action. In 2016 we have an unprecedented mandate to ensure every child leaves school able to read. The SDGs, and specifically SDG 4, have united the world behind a common aim of investing more strategically in education. SDG 4 promises to deliver access to quality education, as well as ensure the most disadvantaged children have equal opportunity to learn to read. It explicitly commits that *"by 2030, all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes"*. This is complemented by a range of other commitments to increase teacher supply, eliminate gender discrimination, and provide safe learning environments, among others.

More broadly, literacy will be key to ensuring that all gains made under the SDG framework are truly sustainable. It is essential to building the human resource capacity needed to drive global development and growth. Literacy is the basis for all learning, and learning in turn will equip us to drive advances in health, agriculture, industry and countless other fields.

Between now and 2030, the world has the opportunity to lay these foundations by ensuring every last child learns to read, thereby equipping future generations to lead development and growth.

## LESSONS IN LITERACY: SAVE THE CHILDREN'S WORK

Save the Children has delivered literacy initiatives for over twenty years. This report seeks to capture lessons from our experience that will inform action by governments, NGOs, civil society and the private sector to ensure every last child learns to read. Specifically, it draws on evidence from Save the Children's four year global focus on literacy during 2012-15. As part of this initiative, we tracked thirty-five literacy programmes across twenty-two countries worldwide, gathering data and evidence in order to identify best practices and the areas where more work is needed in the future. We primarily worked with children aged 0-12 years, the majority of whom were in grades 1-3.

We tested a variety of programme models, including Literacy Boost, an approach to teaching and learning which has so far been adapted for over 30 locations; pre-school approaches including First Read and Emergent Literacy and Maths (ELM); and a broad-based approach to education quality called I'm Learning. We worked in Asia, Africa, Latin America, Europe and the Middle East. We adapted our programmes to increase girls' access to literacy, to meet the needs of linguistic minorities, and for implementation in conflict zones.

During this four year period, we:

- Made progress in literacy outcomes by developing impactful and cost-effective programme and delivery models.
- Successfully developed Literacy Boost as a simple, and replicable model which can be used to improve the teaching of reading, increase the availability of books and other reading materials, and mobilise communities to support children's reading.
- Developed effective approaches to pre-school literacy, which can be delivered affordably by parents and communities as well as through Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres.
- Tested more sustainable approaches to increasing book supply, working with publishers and other book industry stakeholders.
- Adapted programmes for multiple languages, assessing the linguistic nuances of each new context and adjusting our approach accordingly.
- Developed effective approaches to reading assessment which could be implemented by teachers and governments.
- Worked closely with governments from local to national levels to look at how best practices could be scaled up.

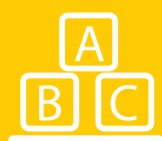
From 2012-2015, we directly reached over 1.3 million children, and worked with teachers, parents and community members in every programme location. The process generated large amounts of evidence, both quantitative and qualitative, illustrating what works where, and why. In order to synthesise this data into a useful and communicable framework, Save the Children developed the '8 Principles for Effective Literacy Action', which form the basis of this report.

## 8 PRINCIPLES FOR EFFECTIVE LITERACY ACTION

Across multiple countries and contexts, there were factors which emerged time and again as the most important in ensuring children learn to read. These are presented in this report as the 8 Principles – the essential components of effective literacy action. Through them, we do not aim to promote a simplified approach to literacy, but rather acknowledge the complexity inherent in ensuring every child learns to read. We have aimed to present a comprehensive framework, covering all the essential components of a quality literacy intervention. While not everything in the framework is new, it builds on and adds to the work of others in the education field.

The 8 Principles, and our findings in relation to them, are discussed in more detail in the body of this report.

An outline of each of the principles is given on the following pages.



## PRINCIPLE 1: START EARLY

*Young children need print rich environments and supportive language interactions in order to develop a solid foundation for learning to read when they get to primary school.*

Enabling children to get an early start by developing their emergent literacy skills, is essential to improve reading abilities in the long term. Through ages 0-6 years, before children begin primary school, it is important they have opportunities to develop vocabulary and become familiar with text. However, across the world, there is considerable inequity in access to early learning opportunities, with 159 million children – nearly half of all 3-6 year olds – without access to pre-school learning.<sup>3</sup>

During the past four years, Save the Children developed new, cost effective approaches to early learning. These included work with dedicated Early Childhood Development (ECD) Centres, as well as, with parents and communities, to raise awareness of the importance of literacy and help them support their children's reading development. Our programmes also demonstrated the value of investing in specific emergent literacy and maths training for ECD teachers, in order to support children's transition into primary school.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY & PRACTICE

- Governments and donors should develop and implement policies that support the development of children's emergent literacy skills from birth until they enter primary school.
- Governments should consider cost effective models for improving children's emergent literacy skills, such as parenting education and efforts to improve the home literacy environment such as book gifting, when scaling up early learning provision.
- Early Childhood Care and Development policies should recognise that parents of every level of literacy have an essential role to play in supporting children's early literacy development.
- ECCD workers should be trained in specific play based early literacy and maths and the early years curriculum where it exists should prioritise the development of these skills.
- Emergent literacy and maths should be part of a holistic approach to early childhood education that focuses on a range of essential school readiness skills.



Photo: Martin Kharunwa / Save the Children

Parfait, two, and her mother Rachael read together at their home. Rachael practices reading with her daughter Parfait as one of the activities she has learnt from the parenting sessions facilitated by Save the Children.



## PRINCIPLE 2: MORE AND BETTER BOOKS

*Children need a variety of age- and context-appropriate reading materials that spark their imagination and motivation to read, and build on their existing language skills.*

Globally, there is a shortage of age and context-appropriate children's titles to support early grade reading. A recent study commissioned by USAID surveyed availability of local-language children's titles in 11 African countries, and identified a profound scarcity of early grade reading texts compared to more advanced levels. There is also a scarcity of minority language texts – for example in Nigeria a survey found that only six out of 500 national languages were represented among early grade reading texts.<sup>4</sup>

Over the past four years, Save the Children tested an approach to increasing access to quality children's reading books. In Rwanda, Bhutan, Cambodia and the Philippines, Save the Children worked with governments and publishers to increase the supply of children's books and adapt existing books, with the goal of cultivating vibrant national publishing industries to generate a steady stream of new local-language titles.

Save the Children's work confirmed that the availability of high quality, age-appropriate reading materials is essential to improve literacy outcomes. Our programmes demonstrated the value of a 'whole chain' approach to book supply, addressing every stage of a book's journey from publisher to child.



Zahiidur, age 9, reads a book at his home in Pocchim Pukra, Bangladesh. He is in class 3 at a government school.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY & PRACTICE

- Invest in an abundance of interesting materials for children to practice reading with.
- Build capacity in the local publishing industry, including by supporting authors, illustrators, editors and publishers as part of a comprehensive policy to stimulate book production.
- Produce guidance to help ensure that children's books are age and culturally appropriate and available in local languages.
- Use advance purchase commitments to support local publishers produce new titles in the knowledge that their titles will be purchased when they are brought to market.
- Support the book sector to showcase their products and identify new book dissemination channels.
- Allocate funds for book buying within national and local education budgets and ensure that a proportion of grants made to schools are used for purchasing books.
- Incorporate guidance on effective book use within teacher training programmes on teaching reading.
- Ensure schools have the support and skills necessary to manage their book collection.
- Identify how the national and local library system where it exists can support children's access to books and strengthen the local literate environment.
- Support parents to use books at home with their children and ensure that children have access to books outside of school.
- Develop a national book policy, aimed at creating an enabling environment for book development, dissemination and use.



### PRINCIPLE 3: ENGAGE PARENTS AND COMMUNITIES

*Parents and community members need to be engaged to support children's language development and reading skills.*

In developing contexts, students sometimes spend as little as 11 per cent of their waking time in a school classroom, and only a small portion of that in-school time is devoted to learning reading skills.<sup>5</sup> As a result, it is critical to maximise the time that children can spend on reading outside of school, by engaging parents and communities in their children's learning.

In 22 countries, Save the Children developed a range of activities which communities and parents could implement to promote children's reading, including book banks, reading buddies, reading clubs and celebrations, and parent education workshops.

Save the Children's work confirmed the link between home literacy environment and primary grade reading skills in low resource settings. Across twelve sites where Literacy Boost was implemented, children that participated in out-of-school reading activities demonstrated better fluency, comprehension and letter recognition.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY & PRACTICE

- Governments should commit to developing a national culture of reading, including by leading multi-stakeholder efforts involving government ministries, including but not only Ministries of Education, civil society and the private sector.
- Reading initiatives and the policies that underpin them must work across society and across sectors targeting children's early, primary and adolescent years and at all stages working with parents and the wider community, focusing simultaneously on what happens in school and promoting reading outside of it.
- Donors and national governments should increase research designed to determine the most cost-effective community based interventions that have the biggest impact in improving children's reading outcomes.



Photo: Susan Warner/Save the Children

Save the Children staff member, Nelson, leads a parent education discussion in Chimondzo, Mozambique.



### PRINCIPLE 4: ENSURE TEACHERS CAN TEACH READING

*Teachers need to be trained and supported in explicit and systematic reading instruction, using the five component skills of early reading.*

In the majority of contexts across the world, teachers are equipped with generalised pedagogical skills but lack the specific training needed to effectively teach reading and literacy. Alongside the many other challenges related to teacher supply, this issue is a key contributing factor in the numbers of children that leave school without foundational literacy skills.

In 22 countries, Save the Children implemented the Literacy Boost model to support teachers to teach reading effectively. The model equips teachers to develop the five component reading skills (see pg. 16), and works on the basis that training should be regular; short; local to the teachers' place of work; reflective; and practical. Implementation of this model demonstrated that reading can be taught effectively, and literacy outcomes improved, in a wide range of contexts through replication of a relatively simple model using the existing national curriculum. It also revealed several challenges that need to be addressed in the coming years in order to equip teachers to ensure every last child leaves school able to read.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY & PRACTICE

- Ensure pre- and in-service teacher training includes specific instruction in the five component reading skills, and supports teachers to use formative assessment for the purposes of lesson planning.
- Invest in research to develop simple methods of delivering training on the five component reading skills to teachers on a large scale, achieving maximum impact with minimum time and at the lowest possible cost.
- Develop realistic and competency-based curricula, standards, and textbooks and ensure teachers are prepared to use them effectively.
- Ensure in-service training for teachers is regular, practical, local, and complemented by opportunities for mentoring and/or peer support.
- Embed staff with specific expertise in reading throughout the education system to ensure teachers are supported to teach reading effectively.



Photo: Lane Hartill/Save the Children

Save the Children trained Linel Borgelin, a sixth-grade teacher, how to make learning more interactive. He teaches at Ecole Splendeur Mixte, a primary school supported by Save the Children in Carrefour, a neighbourhood near Port-au-Prince, Haiti.



## PRINCIPLE 5: LANGUAGE MATTERS

*Reading & writing instruction and activities for children – both in and out of school – should be conducted in a language that children understand.*

Children learn to read best in a language they speak and understand. Policy and practice related to the language of education have significant implications for children's learning opportunities. Language is also an equity issue – in many countries economically marginalised groups are also linguistic minorities and are doubly disadvantaged by the difficulties they experience in accessing education.

Save the Children implemented literacy programmes in countries with a range of different linguistic profiles. In practice this involved a rigorous process at the start of each new programme, encompassing decisions around the language of lessons, materials, and tests, how teachers are trained and deployed, and how to involve communities and local government in decisions around language.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY & PRACTICE

- Literacy programming should be designed using the latest evidence based knowledge on language and its importance to literacy learning.
- Governments, NGOs and donors should conduct robust linguistic situational analyses, including reviews of language-in-education policies and mapping of language groups, of all areas and countries where they work. They must also collect robust and nuanced data on language, to better understand its role in shaping the way children learn to read.
- Collaboration with education officials is needed to adapt literacy programming to apply the most effective Mother Tongue Based Multi-Lingual Education (MTBMLE) model within the constraints of local policy.
- Education systems must ensure that teachers are adequately prepared to teach in mother tongue languages, including through teacher recruitment, deployment, and pre- and in-service training.
- Governments should design and implement comprehensive behaviour change and communication programmes to address attitudes to minority languages that could negatively impact literacy learning in multilingual contexts.
- Governments should develop language policies that are based on a clear understanding of language and literacy learning and are driven by pedagogy, as well as work with NGOs, UN agencies and other governments to continue the discussion around appropriate language policy.



Udiman and his friends Yubaraj and Uttam all participate in a reading camp in Nepal.



## PRINCIPLE 6: PRACTICE, PRACTICE PRACTICE

*Children need ample opportunities to practise their literacy skills, both inside and outside of school.*

Children gain confidence through repeated, enjoyable opportunities to practise reading and writing – at home, in the community, and in school – and by using these skills in their daily life. It is widely proven that reading volume, or the amount of time a child engages in reading, is positively related to reading outcomes.<sup>6,7</sup> Save the Children's 12-site study of Literacy Boost replicated this important finding in a range of developing contexts – from urban Indonesia to rural Ethiopia – demonstrating that children who participate in more out-of-school reading activities have higher reading gains.<sup>8</sup>

In eight countries, Save the Children advocated for more time to be allocated to reading practice. We encouraged reading practice through our work with communities and during teacher training. In Rwanda we developed a guide to help teachers use reading materials effectively in the classroom, while in the UK we developed and implemented the Families Connect programme to support parents to read at home with their children.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY & PRACTICE

- Education systems should identify creative means to incorporate more time for reading practice in the school day.
- Teachers and parents need to be supported to encourage reading practice in the classroom and home.
- In order to be successful reading practice activities should be adapted for the local cultural and community context.



Julie guides her son Harley, age 4, through an activity at a Families Connect session at a school in Belfast, UK.



## PRINCIPLE 7: ASSESS & TRACK

*Formative and summative reading assessments should be conducted at regular intervals in order to tailor reading policies and programmes to the needs of individual learners, disadvantaged groups and students throughout the country.*

At classroom level, regular formative assessments are essential to ensure that the approach to teaching reading is continuously adjusted to meet learners' needs. Summative reading assessment data is needed by ministries to ensure evidence-based decision-making to improve policy and programme implementation.

Save the Children used a variety of tools to assess emergent literacy and core reading skills. In particular we developed the Literacy Boost assessment tool to test foundational-to-advanced reading skills and collect detailed student background data to inform evidence-based programming.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY & PRACTICE

- Education systems need to support teachers to collect, analyse and use formative assessment data, putting in place practical approaches to assessment, which can be delivered within the time available.
- Literacy interventions should track comprehension, alongside other reading skills, as the most important indicator of literacy acquisition.
- Research questions should be defined at the start of each new intervention, with plans in place for how summative data will be used to inform programme design or as a basis for advocacy.
- NGOs and governments should take advantage of the increasing availability of education data and use it to inform policy and practice.



Rani, age 7, reading in her second-grade class in Pakistan. Rani lives in a small house with her parents and four brothers and sisters. Previously, Rani was a weak student who often avoided school because she lacked proper reading and writing skills. However, due to the Literacy Boost programme and increased support from her teachers, her skills have improved greatly and Rani now looks forward to her lessons.



## PRINCIPLE 8: POLICY

*Government policies and an enabling environment must exist to support and sustain teachers, communities and parents to enable children to learn to read.*

Save the Children worked closely with governments in all programme locations to design and implement programmes, gather evidence and identify components for scale-up. However our work on literacy was most effective where we were able to achieve consensus between government, schools, communities, parents and civil society behind improving children's early reading opportunities. Therefore this report urges the development of clear and coherent national policy frameworks which will mobilise a broad set of stakeholders to improve children's reading. It recommends setting clear targets for children's early grade reading, supported by budgets and action plans.

This report argues that a strong reading culture in homes, schools and communities is essential to ensure every child learns to read. While 'reading culture' is difficult to define programmatically, this report suggests that it is possible, and necessary, to build such a culture through clear national policy frameworks, or National Literacy Action Plans, which set out commitments and responsibilities in relation to the previous seven principles described.

## CALL TO ACTION: ENSURING EVERY LAST CHILD CAN READ

The SDGs set out an inspiring and ambitious agenda for the next fifteen years. SDG 4 reinforces the right to a quality and inclusive education. It signifies a shift away from a simple focus on universal primary school access, to a focus on addressing the barriers to learning and equity gaps in education. This is a welcome and needed shift, which brings into stark focus the urgent need to scale-up efforts to ensure every last child learns to read.

This report calls for all countries to prioritise and invest in effective early literacy acquisition for children aged 0-12 years, in order to rapidly and effectively scale-up efforts to ensure every last child learns to read proficiently, and tackle the learning crisis. Unless governments, donors, NGOs and development agencies make investing in literacy a top priority now, there will be little chance of achieving SDG 4, and many of the other SDGs, by 2030.

The following actions are needed to ensure every last child learns to read:

- All countries should develop and adopt National Literacy Action Plans to support children's early grade reading and writing.<sup>i</sup> National Literacy Action Plans should be supported by dedicated, equitable and fair financing; and include targeted policies to remove any discrimination toward excluded groups. They should engage children, parents and communities and be accountable to them.
- Plans should include pre-primary and early grade reading and learning targets to ensure that all children learn to read with comprehension by the time they leave primary school, and set out how the children furthest behind will make progress to meet the targets in order to reduce equity gaps.
- Donors, NGOs and development agencies should ensure all their education interventions assess the impact on literacy acquisition and commit to supporting National Literacy Action Plans.
- Plans should identify and mobilise the wide range of individuals and institutions within a country that have a role to play in children's literacy acquisition, including the public and private sectors, parents and communities and children themselves.
- Plans should commit to delivering the 8 Principles outlined in this report.

The time to invest in literacy is now. We have an unprecedented mandate to revolutionise education systems worldwide, to increase quality and prioritise the needs of the most disadvantaged children. The next generation must be equipped to deliver on and sustain the achievements of the SDGs. Literacy will facilitate this, as an essential foundation for growth and development, and an investment in equity to ensure every last child can read.

<sup>i</sup> Some countries may already have national reading plans (such as have been supported by USAID) or national policy frameworks for literacy – but national literacy action plans would serve to bring all of these pieces together into one place. These plans should include reading and writing and ensure there is sufficient political commitment and prioritisation and a clear action plan in place to deliver national literacy targets.

# LESSONS IN LITERACY

## 8 Principles to Ensure Every Last Child Can Read

Over the last several decades the world has made incredible progress in getting children into school.

However, there is more work to be done to ensure that every last child is learning. While the focus on access to school has been important, it has been prioritised over the quality of learning, leading to what has been termed a 'global learning crisis'.

This global learning crisis has meant that 250 million children cannot read – 130 million of whom cannot read despite completing at least four years of education. Reading is key to enabling children to fulfil their potential at school and throughout their lives. Learning to read can impact a child's health, employment and financial outcomes when they grow up.

Lessons in Literacy draws on evidence from Save the Children's four year global focus on literacy during 2010-2015. Our experience has informed the development of 8 principles for effective literacy action.

We are at a critical juncture in history. In order to ensure every last child can read by 2030, there must be investment in literacy now. To do this, governments must work with partners to develop National Literacy Action Plans and National Reading Campaigns, as well as follow the 8 Principles presented in this report.

Only by doing all of these things, and doing them now, will we have a chance to ensure every last child can read by 2030.

**[savethechildren.net/lessons-in-literacy](https://savethechildren.net/lessons-in-literacy)**

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