

Early Grade Reading: The Experience of Donaberber Full Cycle Primary School in Providing Opportunities to Learn

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of Donaberber Full Cycle Primary School in providing students foundational opportunities enabling them to read in their early grade (grade 1). All teachers (n= 7) assigned to teach grade one students, 2 school principals, and randomly selected 56 (out of 273) first-grade students participated in the study. Data were collected through observation, interviews, document analysis, and focus group discussion. Weft-QDA software was used to conduct a qualitative analysis of the information gathered from observation, interviews, and focus group discussions in order to identify overarching themes. Data from document analysis were analysed quantitatively. The study found that spending available resources differently, the school employed effective and efficient utilization of OTL. Specifically, the investigation revealed that there was an optimal use of instructional time, meaning that students were given maximum instructional time for reading, and reading was the instructional priority for the first three months of the school year, and the school applied an innovative pedagogy. The way the school provided students with foundational opportunities to read early within a few months is a good experience from which others could learn.

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Introduction

Since the introduction of the Ethiopian 1994 education and training policy, various reforms that aimed at improving the access and quality of education have been initiated. These reforms have resulted in an increase in access to education, with primary school enrolment rates increasing from 5.7 million to 20 million over the past two decades (MoE, 2021). Although great progress has been made in terms of access to education for all citizens, the quality of education remains a critical challenge. So far, five National Learning Assessments (NLAs) have been conducted at grades 4 and 8 in Ethiopia. The main objectives of all these assessments were to determine the various levels of student performance in four key academic subject areas, one being basic reading. All NLAs showed that the overall achievement scores at national level were below the expected minimum standards set by the Ministry of Education.

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In 2016, another investigation was conducted on Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) in light of the importance of reading and writing skills development in early grades (USAID, 2010; USAID, 2016; USAID, 2018). The 2016 EGRA results were 60.1%, but then declined to 53.3% in 2018, indicating that the target was not met and scores were deteriorating over time.

The NLAs and EGRA national surveys indicate that poor quality early literacy performance is a concern in primary schools. Additionally, it is not uncommon to hear complaints from parents about the poor reading and writing skills of their children in early grades.

Despite national assessment reports and public discontent, I have observed reports from schools of a reversal in which a large proportion of children remained unreadable in their early years of primary education. According to reports, in some schools, first graders became able to read and write in their mother tongue within a few months of Grade 1 registration.

Donaberber Full Cycle Primary School in Bahir Dar city administration was one of the schools that participated in a symposium which claimed success in early grade reading. As a result, I was very excited to systematically study how the school became effective in children's early grade reading as reported.

To assess whether or not students had acquired the reading and writing skills as reported, we randomly selected 35 students from seven sections and tested them on foundational reading and writing skills. The assessments included letter identification, word naming fluency, and reading comprehension in Amharic. The result of the preliminary assessment was impressive because we found out no nonreaders. We focused on this school, therefore, to explore its experiences in providing students the opportunities for reading early within a few months of registration.

To that end, the study was organized under the following question: How did the school provide Grade 1 students foundational opportunities to read early within a few months of registration?

Significance

The ability to read and understand a text is the most important skill a child should learn in early grades. Learning to read early and at a sufficient rate is critical for children's overall academic success. Based on this importance, the findings from this study could be used by the school to strengthen and further refine its current experiences. The findings might also be used by the Bahir Dar City Education Department to scale up the experience of the school to other schools in the city.

Scope of the study

The present study explored the experiences of Donaberber Full Cycle Primary School in providing students the foundational opportunities that enhance children's early grade reading ability in Amharic language. Based on the OTL pyramid developed by Moore, DeStefano, and Adelman (2012), I made the focus of this study to be on the foundational OTL factors. Issues that

dealt with more complex assessments to estimate children's level of proficiency in reading were not among the focus of the present investigation.

Conceptual Framework

Early Grade Reading

Learning to read is critical to how well students perform in other academic subjects and it sets the foundation for all other learning. According to Roskos, Strickland, Hasse, and Malik (2009), the ability to read and understand a text is the most fundamental skill a child should learn and acquiring these skills begins early and is supported by high quality early reading programs.

The report from USAID (2018) indicates that if children do not learn to read early, they are more likely to have a harder time staying in school and are likely to eventually drop out, or they will fall behind their peers in terms of academic achievement. According to Lyons and Weiser (2009), having good reading skills provides students with a lot of benefits in terms of their academic success, social life, and emotional well-being. However, due to various reasons, not all children learn to read well in the early years. Some children start to have trouble with basic reading skills.

The UNESCO (2020) too indicated that early grade reading is important in order to provide basic skills that will help students learn curriculum in later years. If students do not learn to read well in their first years of school, they will have a harder time learning and doing well in later years. According to the USAID (2010) report, in many countries students enrolled for four or more years are unable to read and understand simple texts.

Opportunity to Learn

Lamain (2018) argues that, in studies published before 1980, the definition of OTL was quite narrow, with a focus on the similarities between the content that has been taught and the test content. Over the next two decades, broader definitions were proposed, including not only the content that is taught, but the way it is taught and by whom it is taught (Elliott, 1998). Even learner variables, like if a student has a computer at home, are sometimes taken into account. Stevens (1993) developed a framework for OTL which included four OTL components. The four elements in this framework are content coverage, content exposure, content emphasis, and quality of instructional delivery. Wang (1998) considered Steven's four OTL factors in his study on the relationship between these variables and students learning and reported that the OTL variables explained a large proportion of the variation in students learning. In his investigation, OTL variables were found to be significantly influenced students' achievement in a multi-level study. Similarly, Benavot and Amadio (2004) reported that pupil achievement increases when students are given greater opportunities to learn.

There are many different conceptions of "OTL," which can lead to confusion about its definition. Recently, Moore, DeStefano, and Adelman (2012) illustrated an OTL pyramid indicating the level of factors as foundational (lowest level) and complex interventions (higher

level). They added, the lowest level factors have a huge impact on learning outcomes by spending available resources differently.

The concept of OTL embodies two dimensions: the amount and quality of exposure. As literature shows, the educational value of foundational opportunity to learn depends on how teachers and students use the time available during the day, how much time is engaged in academic activities, and the quality of those activities. Moore, DeStefano, and Adelman (2012) developed an opportunity to learn index consisting of 12 factors intended to describe and measure the basic elements required for initial learning to occur. Some of these factors are related to the use of instructional time as an input and others are related to the quality of pedagogy. The OTL definition used in this study is based on Moore, DeStefano, and Adelman's work.

Methods

Research Design

This study used a case study research design to explore the experience of Donaberber Full Cycle Primary school on how the school provided grade 1 students foundational opportunities to read early within a few months of registration. Case study, according to Yin (2006), is an approach to explore a phenomenon within its context using a variety of data sources. Yin stipulates that case study explores phenomena with a variety of lenses which allows for multiple facets of the phenomenon to be revealed and understood. The present study used various data collection methods in order to have an in depth understanding of how the school became successful in children's early grade reading.

Sampling

The participants of this study were seven teachers, two school principals, and 56 first-grade students from all the seven sections in Donaberber full cycle primary school. Teachers teaching first graders and principals of the school were all involved in an interview and focus group discussions. Students were randomly selected from seven sections (8 students from each section) and were given a reading test (35 students for the preliminary study) and interviewed (21 students for the main study).

Data Gathering Tools and Procedures

To address the purpose of the study, data were gathered through observation, interviews, document analysis, and focus group discussion. The interviewees were teachers teaching in grade one, the school principal, and first grade students. There were also observations and focused group discussions. Minutes, attendance sheets, and documents related with student assessment were also analyzed.

First, students' preliminary reading skills were assessed using a reading test. Then the school principals have been interviewed to obtain information about teachers, students, how the

school carries out activities related to early grade reading, how the school handles challenges in the process. For this purpose, interview guidelines were prepared and used. I also had a focus group discussion and observations with those teachers teaching in grade one focused on the same agenda. Students were also interviewed with the aim of getting a general idea about the support they get from their parents, how they support each other, common classroom practices, and the supports from their teachers to become better readers and writers. Document analysis was carried out in conjunction with data from observation, interviews, and focus group discussion.

Data Analysis Techniques

Depending on the nature of the data, qualitative and quantitative analysis techniques were used. For data analysis, first twelve discrete codes were identified. Then three broad categories or themes were established using Weft-QDA software. The school's OTL index was determined quantitatively in percentages. Data from interviews, focus group discussions, and observations were analyzed qualitatively.

Results

Quantitative Data

To determine the school's OTL index, the school's academic calendar, teacher attendance sheets, student attendance sheets, and meeting minutes were analyzed. In addition, classroom observation was carried out. It was estimated by calculating the difference in the percentage of days the school was open over all possible days; percentage of average teacher attendance rate, percentage of average student attendance rate, percentage of school days available for instruction, and percentage of classroom time that children spend on tasks.

The school was actually open from the beginning of the school year and the end of the first semester; data was collected from school records, staff attendance records and photographs. The school was found to have opened on the official start date and closed for vacation on the last day of the first semester. A staff meeting was held at the end of the first semester and records were viewed in the principal's office showing that teachers' attendance records had been collected.

After collecting data from the attendance, it was found that the percentage of teacher attendance was high (96.59%). We also observed their presence in the classrooms on three randomly selected days, and found that all teachers were in their classrooms with their students on all three occasions. Similarly, data on school truancy for students was collected from the attendance and the percentage determined. The data was collected from schools' official attendance books, which indicated that the percentage of first grade students in the first semester of the school year, on average, attended the school nearly 96 percent of the time. Three observations were made, and nearly 95 percent of the students were in their classrooms on average.

To estimate the percentage of the school day available for instruction, the non-instructional components of the school day, such as recess, late start, early end, or experience interruptions in instructional time for a variety of reasons (e.g., the teacher or students may be out of class) were

investigated and data were collected on the loss of instructional time during the school day. According to estimates from the department head report, a day and a half was lost during school time from the first semester. The percentage of the school day available for instruction was therefore about 96% (Table 1). The data presented in Table 1 shows that the schools' profile in terms of OTL indicators was high.

Table 1

Potential OTL compared with Actual OTL

OTL Indicators					
Semester Official	Teacher		Student	Time Available	Time Spend
School Days	Attendance Rate		Attendance Rate	for Instruction	“on task”
Potential OTL	88 days	88 days	88 days	352 hrs.	352 hrs.
Actual OTL	88 days	85 days	85.24 days	340 hrs.	318 hrs.
Percent	100	96.59	96.86	96.60	90.34

Qualitative Data

School principals, teachers and students were asked to report on how the school meets its responsibilities in relation to children's early reading. Table 2 shows the codes and themes identified from the interviews and focus group discussion (FGD). In general, the use of classroom time to the maximum extent, the emphasis on reading in the lower grades, and the application of inclusive pedagogy were elucidated through interviews, focus groups, and observations.

Table 2

Codes and Themes Established from Interviews and FGD

Code (OTL)	Theme
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No late start, no early end • High teacher attendance rate • High student attendance rate • Optimal time available for instruction • School level reading assessment 	Effective use of the school calendar
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student textbook ratio • Academic competition forums • Class size 	Emphasis on reading in lower grades
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early diagnosis • Time on task • Continuous assessment • Cooperative instructional approach (small groups) 	Application of inclusive pedagogy

Effective Use of School Calendar

Qualitative data (Table 2) shows that the schools' official calendar days were used very sensibly. There was no late start, nor was there early end. Alongside this, there was a high teacher attendance rate, a high student attendance rate, and optimal time available for teaching.

In terms of sensible use of the official school calendar days, the school management reported, for example, that they strictly adhere to the school calendar and do not lose any school days available for lessons due to a late start, early end or other reasons. Similarly, one of the focus group discussants informed that formal teaching and learning was started just on the first day of the school year. She said the following:

We usually schedule and fix activities for students before they come back from vacation. School was also closed for vacation on the last day of the academic calendar. Both teachers and students have been working until the end of first semester.

Emphasis on Reading in Lower Grades

Qualitative data (Table 2) also shows that reading was given high importance in the lower grades of school. Commitments the school emphasized included school-level reading comprehension assessments, individual provision of textbooks to students, forums for reading competitions, and minimizing class size. In this regard, principals and teachers reported that they supported each other by emphasizing reading and writing for the first graders in the first three months of the school year and that these internal support systems were in place. In addition, students' literacy skills were assessed at school level, in addition to continuous classroom assessment conducted by teachers. Regarding this practice, the principal reported that the school placed the instructional focus on literacy activities in the first three months of the school year to get first grade students engage reading and writing, and this focus was guided by a separate one intervention plan.

Teachers also said they spent most of their time in reading and writing classes during the first three months. One of the discussants said:

We got a big assignment from the school which was to get all the students literate within three months from the date of enrollment. The aim was to ensure that student performance was not below average. The direction of how we tackled this great task was clear and shared from the start. In the first months our focus was on teaching reading and writing, and then we were successful.

Teachers add on saying:

We plan performance indicators and acceptable performance levels together. There is cross-class supervision among the first class teachers. We meet weekly and discuss problems for which there are immediate solutions. This usually happened on Friday after class. Solutions were passed on and every weekend was used to agree on these solutions. There was a teacher ranking based on our proficiency level. Fortunately, we all did best in the first semester. We believe this achievement

was the result of teamwork, close monitoring and dedication. We would like to thank our school management for recognizing our efforts.

The methods of assessment used in school vary, but a common method is continuous assessment, usually conducted by the class teacher. Academic competition forums were also held (students representing their departments will compete before any first grade students). The third and more systematic assessment was carried out centrally at the school. The pupils of the first class were tested on their reading and writing skills by means of a test prepared centrally at the school level.

Regarding the assessment techniques practiced, the school principal reported that teachers use various techniques to assess students' reading and writing levels. As he reported, teachers evaluate continuously throughout the teaching process and get through student academic competitions.

Application of Inclusive Pedagogy

Qualitative data (Table 2) shows that early diagnosis, time for assignments, continuous assessment, collaborative teaching approach (small groups) were the approaches used by the school to get students reading early. In this regard, the director felt that effective and efficient use of class time is a valuable asset for the school. He reported that classrooms are often observed to assess the extent to which teachers engage students in productive activities. The director also added that teachers have been found to use class time to engage students in productive classroom activities that engage students in reading and writing. Teachers don't waste time leaving children in the classroom with unproductive tasks.

To triangulate the data, we observed teachers and students in their classrooms and recorded the types of classroom activities and the types of materials used. Both students and teachers were observed at work most of the time. Non-instructional activities (discipline and student withdrawal) were very rare. From the focus group discussion, we have also learned that they were working courageously, without being pushed by some other external force. As reported in the FGD, extra support for grade one students on reading and writing (usually on the weekends) was commonplace in the school.

Both principals and teachers reported that the school's performance in diagnosing learning needs was thorough and organized. They said that the students' background information is well documented and that the need for assistance is diagnosed early through a continuous assessment process. Early interventions were then put into practice at school. Here is teachers' account of how they organize information about their students from the very beginning.

We were assigned by our department to teach the first grade. First, we worked to have basic data about our students' backgrounds. We all interviewed their parents when they came to our school. We have recorded information and then make it part of the child's profile reference document. Continuous evaluation takes place at our school on a daily basis. We use formats to capture how children participate

in their small groups, academic difficulties and strengths, emotions, and so on. Since the class size is small, it is not that difficult to follow the behavioral development of the children in the first grade.

Referring to how teachers identify students and provide academic support, another FGD discussant said that they assess students' level of reading and other aspects of behavior to classify them into three categories: struggling readers, intermediate readers, and fast readers. This helped them develop customized plans and implement remedial actions specifically for each student. As he said, this allowed them to know each student's strengths and weaknesses and how to approach each individually, based on shared activities in small groups. As a teaching method, student groups are formed and used in the classroom according to the concept of mixed ability groups.

The principal described what the early intervention program at the school looks like. Three pedagogical approaches, namely, supporting them through small groups, grouping them with students from their villages, and providing individual tutoring were employed to helping struggling readers.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine Donaberber Full Cycle Primary School's experiences in providing students with essential opportunities that enable them to read in their early grades. Utilization of classroom time to the greatest possible extent (high OTL), emphasis on reading in the lower grades, and application of inclusive pedagogy were explored through document analysis, interviews, focus group discussions, and observation.

Firstly, this study has shown that the school's official calendar days were used very wisely and to the maximum. There was also no late start and no early end to the school calendar. In addition, a high attendance rate of the teachers, a high attendance rate of the students and an optimal use of the available time for the lessons were observed.

The school seems to understand the irreplaceable value of the time a child should devote to reading. In this context, Save the Children International (2016) found that children need ample opportunities to practice their literacy skills both inside and outside of school. Save the Children International (2016) widely demonstrated that reading volume, or the amount of time a child spends reading, is positively related to reading outcomes. Save the Children reiterated this important finding in a range of development contexts, from urban Indonesia to rural Ethiopia.

In contrast to this finding, however, a study by USAID (2010) in Woliso, Ethiopia, found that students' reading performance was low. The low performance was attributed to the reason that the schools did not use the teaching time available to them. According to the report, teacher and student absences combined reduce the time available for instruction by up to 43 percent. Also, the time the school was open and teachers and students were present was further reduced by the fact that the students were not busy studying. Moore, DeStefano, and Adelman (2012) have a similar conclusion that students almost always receive less than the prescribed number of hours of

instruction. In the present study, however, the school used an optimal time for teaching. The school was strict about the use of the school calendar. Almost no school days available for instruction were lost due to late start, early end or other reasons. The time available for the lesson and the time devoted to the task were very high. It appears partly because of this that the school achieved its goal in raising students' reading performance. Benavot and Amadio (2004) find that student achievement increases when students are given more opportunities to learn, particularly when engaged study time is maximized.

The high OTL in the school could be the result of the support for the teaching staff, the teachers' supervision, and the regular meetings between teachers, parents, the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) and the Parent-Teacher-Student Association (PTSU). The agreements signed between teachers and student parents helped ensure that both parties were held accountable for student attendance and student learning. It is believed that all of these strategies worked together to support the school's success.

Second, it was observed in this study that reading was emphasized in the lower grades in school. Minimized class size, individual provision of textbooks and other age-appropriate reading materials to students, school-level reading assessment, and reading competition forums were among the commitments the school emphasized.

The evidence for the benefits of small class size is inconclusive. However, Haimson (2000) reported that the experience of class size reduction observed by principals and teachers was overwhelmingly positive. The quality and quantity of teaching has improved fundamentally because smaller classes allowed teachers to give more individual attention to their students and have used small group teaching more effectively. He claims smaller classes have allowed teachers to assess and follow up on students more frequently. Haimson (2000) argues that children need a variety of age- and context-appropriate reading materials that stimulate their imagination and motivation to read and build on their existing language skills, although improving access to quality children's reading books globally is a challenge.

In contrast to the findings of the present study, in addition to the loss of time on task that is evident in schools and classrooms, USAID (2010) reported that reading instruction is virtually non-existent in Bacho, Dendi, and Goro schools. The vast majority of classroom activities were not classified as instruction in reading, nor did they involve students reading text.

In the present study, we observed that the school placed emphasis on literacy activities in the first three months of the school year to get first-grade students up to speed on reading and writing. This focus was guided by a separate intervention plan. Making literacy a focus of instruction in the early grades requires not only the commitment and creativity of teachers, but also the attention and appropriate support of educators and the community at different levels. In order to minimize class size and use textbooks one-to-one, the decision and support of educational leaders is paramount.

Third, the present study has shown that early identification of learning needs, maximum time for a task, practice of continuous assessment, and use of a collaborative teaching approach (small groups) were the approaches used by the school to get students reading early bring to.

Literature portrays that early screening can lead to timely detection of learning difficulties that may indicate risk for learning. Early screening can result in children receiving additional help sooner and prevent them from falling behind.

However, USAID (2010) reported poor pedagogical practices observed in the schools. According to the report, there seemed to be no structured approach to teaching reading in schools. This study, however, indicates the existence of the practice of innovative pedagogy in the school. The school believes that literacy development requires high levels of interaction between students. To maximize class time, teachers grouped the children into small teams and helped them engage in group and cross-group exercises. This would give teachers more time to focus on each student. Small groups have played an important role in providing adequate instruction time. The school has mechanisms in place to coordinate student collaboration outside of the classroom and inside the school and classroom.

Conclusion and Implications

Based on the results of the study, it can be concluded that Donaberber Full Cycle Primary School gave the children basic opportunities to read early within a few months of admission. Ways include using the school calendar effectively, emphasizing reading in the early grades, and implementing an inclusive pedagogy.

The results of this study tell us about future practice in teaching reading in early grades that one of the best experiences of the school in enabling students read in their early enrollment lies on the high OTL. The benefits of maximizing learning opportunities could be significant and would help ensure student engagement and literacy in the first grades as teachers would have ample time to teach children and children would have ample opportunities to practice their reading and writing skills both inside and outside of school.

The study has also shown that early reading in the lower grades is the school's top priority. The school had a separate plan for early reading, class sizes were deliberately minimized, experienced and energetic teachers were used to teach, and school-level reading competitions and EGRA were held. All of these actions enabled the school to take appropriate action to adapt teaching materials and practices. It also enabled the school to ensure teacher and community commitment to achieve its goal.

The results also suggest that teachers teaching first graders use innovative pedagogies. They begin their work by examining students based on their reading ability. Screening can lead to timely detection of learning difficulties that might signal risk for learning. Early screening can result in children receiving additional help sooner and prevent them from falling behind.

Limitations of the Study

The present study has two important limitations. First, the focus of this study is only on foundational reading skills in the Amharic language. It was not intended to examine all the reading skills students need to develop. Second, though teacher development practices are key factors in equipping teachers with the skills necessary to teach reading effectively, this dimension was not

considered in this study. Therefore, these could be considered as topics that could potentially attract the attention of future researchers.

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