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EdData II

EGRA Plus: Liberia

Success Stories



Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) Plus: Liberia
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EGRA Plus: Liberia

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Preface

This report contains several success stories stemming from the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) Plus: Liberia program, led by RTI International under the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Contract Number Contract EHC-E-06-04-00004-00.

The first story in the set is an overview of the successes of the USAID-funded EGRA Plus: Liberia intervention, which took place from October 2008 through January 2010. It was written by RTI project staff to summarize the project’s achievements and lessons learned.

The seven stories that follow were written by Liberian “coaches,” or master trainers, in their own voices and from their own experience working with teachers, students, and communities during the intervention.

Rebuilding Liberia on the Strength of Words

He wasn't nervous before. But as he stepped up to the microphone in front of a crowded room, Moses felt the weight of the moment. He was about to take the oral reading fluency test in the Kakata District Reading Competition. Organized by the Early Grade Reading Assessment Plus (EGRA Plus: Liberia) project, the competition was one of many activities designed to motivate and equip students, teachers, and parents to improve literacy among Liberia's children. Moses, a grade 3 student at a participating EGRA Plus school, now had the chance to show what he had learned...

Reading is fundamental to academic success and lifelong learning. But in many developing countries, children are in school for three, four, even five or six years before they can read and understand a simple text. The longer it takes children to learn to read, the further they fall behind in school, and the more likely they are to repeat grades or drop out.

Between 2008 and 2010, EGRA Plus demonstrated through a research-based intervention that even in the precarious conditions of Liberian schools, children can reverse the illiteracy trend and improve in reading fluency and comprehension at dramatic rates. This success can be a model for other countries. Here's how it happened.



More than half of Liberian adults cannot read or write. EGRA Plus: Liberia was designed at the request of the Liberian Ministry of Education to address the country's illiteracy epidemic at the source: the early grades of school. [Credit: M. Korda]

Education, a Casualty of War

In 1989, a civil war broke out in Liberia. Fighting continued sporadically for 14 years, leaving a quarter million people dead and displacing thousands more. Liberia's schools were also a casualty of the war. Half of classrooms were destroyed or suffered substantial damage. The teaching force was depleted. And nearly 500,000 youth were out of school.

With the end of the conflict, Liberia's Ministry of Education requested assistance from international donors. They responded, providing assistance to rehabilitate schools, reform curricula, print and distribute textbooks, give rapid training to teachers, and create pathways for out-of-school youth to complete their education. While rushing to recruit teachers and fill classrooms with students, Liberia's Ministry of Education knew that they still had to develop a plan for addressing the low levels of learning in their schools.

Genesis of EGRA Plus

More than half of Liberians cannot read and write. In 2008, the World Bank funded a study of how well Liberian children were learning to read in English. RTI International was contracted to lead the assessment. With assistance from the Liberian Education Trust, RTI used a version of the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) adapted to the Liberian context to test a sample of grade 2 and 3 students in the five main skills that together create reading:

- phonemic awareness – the ability to manipulate sounds in words;
- phonics – linking letters to sounds to form spelling patterns;
- fluency – reading orally with speed, accuracy, and proper expression;
- vocabulary – oral and print knowledge of words; and
- comprehension – deriving meaning from the text.

Completed in November 2008, the pilot study found that Liberian children were doing reasonably well in some skill areas, but were struggling in others, such as reading unfamiliar or made-up words, or reading words fluently in sentences and paragraphs. On average, students could only read 18 correct words per minute at the end of grade 2, and 28 correct words per minute at the end of grade 3, well below the point at which children begin comprehending what they read (considered to be 60 correct words per minute).

“At this rate of improvement, the average Liberian student would be in grade 6—if they made it that far—before breaking through to literacy,” said Medina Korda, RTI education specialist and coordinator of EGRA Plus.

The pilot study also found that Liberian children who spoke English at home, who had books at home, and who read aloud with someone at home were almost a whole grade level ahead in reading fluency compared to children who lacked such a supportive home environment. Furthermore, the study found that students performed better on the reading assessment when their teachers had received in-service training in the past year, particularly focused on reading instruction.

The Experimental Design

With World Bank funding, RTI designed EGRA Plus to address the deficits noted in the pilot study. It would be both an intervention and a randomized control trial to produce rigorous evidence on how to improve reading even in the most challenging of circumstances. The intervention—broken into two parts—focused on the two main levers for change: teachers in the classroom and parents in the home.

Adopting the language of clinical studies, RTI labeled the two parts of the intervention the “light treatment” and the “full treatment.” These two treatment methods would be applied in several schools and then compared against a control group of schools that followed the standard reading instruction approach in Liberia. Pre- and post-tests in all three groups would allow the Ministry of Education to see whether students receiving the

treatment made reading gains significantly greater than those by students in the control group. The distinctions among these three groups are highlighted in the table below.

Comparison of Light Treatment and Full Treatment Interventions

	Control	Light Treatment	Full Treatment
EGRA Assessment	yes	yes	yes
School Report Card	no	yes	yes
Face-to-Face Teacher Training	no	no	yes
School-Based Teacher Support	no	no	yes
Teacher Reading Kits	no	no	yes
Student Reading Books	no	no	yes
Informal Assessments	no	no	yes
Ongoing Project Support	no	no	yes

In the control group, student reading levels would be tested, but schools would not be informed that they would be retested.

In the light treatment group, reading levels would be tested and schools would be informed of the results and shown how to share them with the community through report cards. This minimal intervention was designed to evaluate whether or not simply receiving information about students’ reading levels would motivate teachers and parents to focus on reading instruction and lead to student reading gains.

In the full treatment group, reading levels were assessed; parents and communities were informed; teachers were trained on how to continually assess student performance; and teachers were provided frequent school-based teaching support, resource materials, and books.

Implementation Challenges

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) funded the execution and evaluation of the EGRA Plus experiment, which was applied in 180 schools across Bomi, Bong, Gbapolu, Lofa, Margibi, Monteserrado, and Nimba counties. These schools were sampled in proportion to enrollment and then divided into three groups of 60

corresponding to the light treatment, full treatment, and control groups. Grades 2 and 3 were the target of the interventions. All told, roughly 2,900 students participated in the project. A baseline EGRA found that students in all three groups were starting from similar reading levels.

When the intervention in January 2009, RTI quickly found that the Liberian teachers needed a lot of training to make up for a lack thereof during and after the civil war. Developing lessons plans and measuring their progress along the way were new skills for many of the teachers and required time and dedication. So, in the second year of the program, RTI designed and distributed to all the full treatment schools a series of 80 scripted lessons and a schedule for delivering them so that teachers could follow a sequence of reading instruction one step at a time.

To complicate matters, in the first month of the intervention, thousands of volunteer teachers went on strike in response to the dismissal of all unqualified volunteer teachers who had been recruited to meet the teacher demand following the civil war. This dismissal removed nearly 20% of the teachers in the EGRA Plus program, who then had to be replaced by new trained teachers. And the nationwide strike delayed the return to school after the holidays, putting off the effective start of the intervention by more than a month.

As a result, year 1 of EGRA Plus, which was intended to cover a half-year of school, amounted to just 3.5 months of intervention. But even in this short period, students in the full and light treatment schools made significant improvements in fluency. A midterm assessment found that full treatment and light treatment students were reading 7.2 and 6.1 words per minute, respectively, more than the control group.

Big Gains

RTI project staff conducted the final student assessment at the end of EGRA Plus in June 2010. They found that after one-and-a-half years of intervention, students in the full treatment group outperformed their peers in all reading skills. They improved dramatically, nearly tripling the gains made by the control group in oral reading fluency and reading comprehension. In terms of rate of improvement over the project period, the full treatment group improved in reading fluency 4.5 times faster and in reading comprehension 5 times faster than the control group.



Teachers in EGRA Plus schools learned to use instructional aids—like a “pocket chart”—to help students see the link between sounding letters and forming words.[Credit: M. Korda]

The full treatment group also increased unfamiliar word fluency sevenfold, indicating that EGRA Plus had a particularly large impact on improving children’s decoding—the ability to break new words into sounds and link them together—which is a key intermediate step to unlocking fluency and comprehension.

Interestingly, the final assessment found that the gains in reading among the full treatment group had a small, positive impact on students’ achievement on an Early Grade Math Assessment (EGMA) compared to light treatment and control groups.

“Even though no part of EGRA Plus targeted mathematics, this finding suggests that improved reading instruction and assessment skills can raise education quality in general by increasing teachers’ ability to teach new subjects or by improving students’ ability to learn new skills,” said Benjamin Piper, RTI education research specialist.

At the end of EGRA Plus, the light treatment group did not significantly outperform the control group.

“The lack of sustained improvement in the light treatment group indicates that even though assessment can focus teachers on the importance of reading, they are still hindered by their limited knowledge of the process and methods for proper teaching of reading,” said Piper.

How and Why

Among the package of EGRA Plus interventions, RTI found through follow-up surveys that teachers ranked the lesson plans as the most useful to improving their practice. This is supported by the increased rates of learning observed between years 1 and 2 of the project, when RTI and the Liberian Education Trust prepared scripted, sequenced lessons plans to make up for the shortfall in teachers’ own lesson planning skills.

Coaching came in as a close second in terms of value to the program outcomes. As one participant noted, the coaches were the “current for the electrical wire” that brought the instructional training to life for teachers. When teachers were reluctant to make changes to the way they taught their class, effective coaches were able to persuade and encourage them to adopt the new strategies.

Throughout the project, RTI also built the capacity of dozens of Liberian Ministry of Education officials in student reading assessments and most of them were deployed to assist with data collection. Many were also trained in instructional methods and accompanied coaches on school visits, where they had the opportunity to practice their skills and support teachers.

“The wealth of data from EGRA Plus assessments also provides the Ministry of Education with enough evidence to set appropriate national benchmarks for reading skills at each level of primary school in Liberia,” said Korda. “This will help the government evaluate school performance and direct resources to trouble spots.”

Based on the remarkable success of EGRA Plus and these capacity-building efforts, RTI will support the Ministry of Education to scale up the intervention to nearly 2000 schools in nine counties as an implementing partner on the new five-year USAID Liberia Teacher Training Program 2.

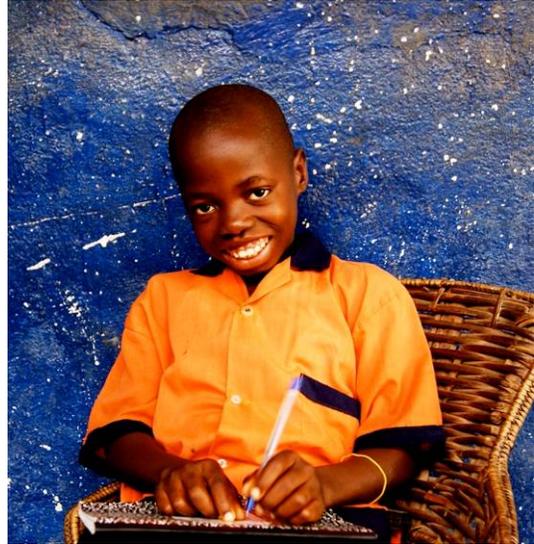
Reading for All

Back at the Kakata District Reading Competition, Moses takes a sheet of paper handed to him. It's a story. The teacher starts the timer: Moses has 60 seconds to read as much of the story as possible. He begins, "One day...John and his dad set out...to fish. They took a net with them...on the trip..." Before the timer beeps, Moses has finished the story.

He made his parents and school proud. At the start of EGRA Plus, Moses was a grade 2 student who could only read 10 to 15 words per minute and could not answer any comprehension questions.

Through the EGRA Plus intervention, Moses was able to learn the fundamental skills of reading in the classroom and to practice reading at home. Now he is prepared to begin reading books to learn on his own in grade 4, grade 5, and onward.

And, by the way, he won the competition.



Since EGRA Plus changed the approach to reading instruction in many Liberian schools, Moses and other children like him have the opportunity to pick up a book and understand the text they see on the page. [Credit: M. Korda]

These success stories were written by coaches and submitted to EGRA Plus: Liberia in December 2009 by the coaches and their District Education Officers (DEOs), as part of the Reviving Reading in Liberia competition that was organized among the 15 participating districts.

Kolahun District, Lofa County

Coach: Teerix Beh

DEO: William K. Kollie

Award: First place

Exceptional-Student Stories

EGRA Plus: Liberia has really brought a revival in the reading program of our country. For many years most of our schools, especially public, have been glued to the old traditional way of teaching reading (rote and memorization). This caused a serious setback in the reading proficiency of our children. The EGRA intervention has made a big difference.

After one full year of intervention using the five big skills, there is now a wave of excitement, determination, and confidence about reading among students, teachers, and the district as a whole.

In November 2009, three students were selected from three of the four full-treatment schools as the most exceptional readers. We call them THE KOLAHUN DISTRICT SUPER READERS. Selection was done based on each child's ability in the five big skills. Here are their stories.

Student **Mama Shariff**, age 10, grade 3, Lankan Community School. Mama is the best student in phonics and phonemic awareness. She has excellent skills in blending phonemes, recognizing digraph and consonant-blend sounds, and reading nonsense words. She is our decodable books reading wizard. The community radio station "Radio Halengee" selected her as a Child Broadcaster. Mama is very grateful to EGRA.

Student **Varnie Tengbeh**, age 11, grade 3, Elizabeth Blunt Public School. The five big skills have helped students in Kolahun District to always want to discover new words, their meaning, and their pronunciation. Varnie is the best student in fluency and vocabulary. He is always seen attacking new words, finding the meaning, and using them in sentences. He also reads at home regularly as evidenced from his "read-at-home tracker." He is the head of the reading club at his school.

Student **Charles Gborie**, age 10, grade 3, Kolomanjoe Public School. Charles is the most exceptional among the three. He's always at his best in the five big skills. He is in charge of the mobile library at his school, ensuring that the library is set up every morning at his school. He is seen during recess reading to his friends. He loves the Stella Maris books and he is the only person who read five different ones.

District Bopolu

Coach: Evelyn Varmah

DEO: Mada Kortu M. Okwaumuo

Award: Second place

About a Teacher

Jallah Lone Public School is located in Gbarpolu County, Bopolu District. The teacher who teaches reading in this school attended all the training and also received all necessary reading material, yet he was not teaching reading at all. This was simply because he lacked the interest and termed it as extra work. I coached him, encouraged him, and even demonstrated many lessons at his school just to have him on board, but I did not succeed.

I designed another strategy by encouraging [another EGRA-trained] teacher from a different school to teach in his school for three days, which he did. On my return to visit the students were all happy and told me about the visiting teacher who taught them the reading lesson. Following this example, their teacher started teaching and did well in his lesson presentation as well. He demonstrated it for me. The teacher now faithfully promised to commit himself to the lesson plans. In the end, the new idea worked and we hope for more improvement in this school.

Digraphs?

I noticed that my students had problems with defining digraphs, making consonant blends, saying their short vowel sounds, and decoding consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC). I decided to make some drawings and placed these definitions and examples beneath in the form of a conversation. I also pasted them in the classrooms. Given the fact that children are interested in pictures, especially with beautiful colors, their minds were easily captivated and as such they curiously looked at the pictures and read writings beneath them every morning. This helped them to comprehend the lesson. (Examples of drawings are available upon request.)

Gbarnga District, Bong County

Coach: Isaac Garlo

DEO: Jackson Sengbeh

Award: Third place

A Coach and Teachers in Gbarnga District

This document seeks to highlight the hard beginning and successful point in time in training and supporting teachers from the schools selected for full treatment in Gbarnga District. Schools in Gbarnga District were assessed and grouped into three categories: control, light, and full-treatment schools. We were [fortunate] to have been selected to serve as coaches for the light and full-treatment schools since December 2008. The attached story discloses details of difficulties and now some successful gains.

Early encounter

I first came into contact with the majority of my teachers in December 2008 in a five-day challenging workshop to train the teachers in a new reading skill. The December 2008 workshop brought together teachers from the four full-treatment schools. The workshop brought together 10 teachers. These teachers knew little or nothing about the new skill. Our first meeting was predominantly about trial and error as the teachers were learning new skills. The workshop ended with little achievement by the teachers. More needed to be done with letters, sounds, the five big reading skills, and the lesson plan sequence.

The teachers ended the five days with fears and doubts if they could understand and teach the new skills. The situation grew worse when the Ministry of Education postponed the opening of schools in early January 2009 to settle volunteer teacher compensation. After the long break, I returned to model for my teachers, who might have forgotten the little they learned in the five days' training. When they saw me back, they were a bit surprised but said that they remembered me saying that I would come back in January to assess their work. At this time, some were shy when meeting me while others were happy.

Working together

As a coach, I saw this assignment as a big challenge for me and my district. It took me my first visit in 2009 to model for my teachers by teaching the skill in their classes. I did model effectively as I had done more reading and planning ahead of time. After the first visit, I had a series of opportunities to practice. These visits allowed me the chance to develop personal working relationship with the teachers. We began to make schedules of our own outside of EGRA. We met for extra practices and studies. These meetings also helped to remove fears and promoted good working relationships as well as unity among us. Teachers began to share personal as well as subject-related problems. We humbled ourselves in listening to these problems and helped solve the ones that were within our reach.

Growing in working relationship

Now, teachers were attending all planned sessions and willingly participating in practicing teaching whenever we met. Teachers planned and brought lessons to me without me asking for it. Whenever practicing teaching was done, recommendations and criticisms were constructive. I also visited classes and saw students actively responding to the reading lessons. I also taught in front of teachers and they evaluated my performance as well. These responses gave me joy because while we were gaining true knowledge of skills, we were also growing in our working relationship. We occasionally used names of streets and other locations to practice phonetic sounds of letters. We also practiced familiar words such as dog, cat, mat, etc. These exercises opened the way to cordial working relationships and a peaceful transition from the old to the new method of teaching.

Second encounter

Our second official workshop, which took place in August 2009, was full of joy and yet sorrow. It was a happy thing to meet again after almost two months of break from one another. The teachers were very receptive, lively, and most confident, having heard that [the training topic] was the same or almost the same skill. They also saw that the different or separate manuals were included in the one teacher manual and that now they would go home with one book. On the other hand, I was sad because I missed some of the old teachers. I was told that these teachers had left the program because they changed schools in search of greener pastures. New faces were eager to replace the departed teachers but it all meant a new beginning. We did not give up the task; we embraced and shared responsibilities with the old teachers who knew the skill already. New ones were grouped with old ones. This session was dominated by group work: planning and practice teaching. Each participant had the opportunity for presentation through the five days of the workshop.

Mature working relationship

After the second workshop, teachers came to exercise a high degree of willingness to work with one another and also with the coach. Teachers were heard making scheduled practices with one another to meet and study. In most cases, it was the new teachers meeting with the old teachers for tutoring or the successful schools' teachers sharing with teachers from struggling schools. Teachers were very responsive to me whenever I visited a school and saw lapses and set up extra time to meet with the teachers. We met several times without any requests for food or any other compensation. This signaled to me that teachers were eager to learn the skill despite not receiving compensation (although this does not root out the need for compensation for teachers in the program).

Manifesting maturing in the new skill

The teachers from the four full-treatment schools have proven themselves to be intelligent, cooperative, trained, and very mature. The teachers agreed to learn and to implement the new skill under difficult circumstances. Almost all of my teachers are parents with family responsibilities, and some were volunteer teachers. Under these conditions they agreed to work with us and learn new skills. Being trained and very mature, the teachers kept taking my advice to work earnestly, as the future of the program rested squarely on the impact of us all. More than that, they also exercised a high degree of maturity in persistence and caring for children. This changed the students' minds to like the reading program. In this way, the students quickly learned from them, which led to highly dedicated classrooms.

Servants not more than a master

I have so much enjoyed working with my teachers in that we are friends and in most cases they know I am there to serve them. We play and work together and they see that my life is not very different from theirs. They were very gracious with me, even though some seemed upset with me while others wanted to learn even more than me. When I would observe the presentations of my teachers, I would be surprised as to how quickly they learned the skill. I sometimes get astonished at how composed and articulate teachers are. I wondered if the teachers were even surpassing me. But I remembered Jesus' words that a servant is not more than a master. And a good coach is not more than his teachers.

* * *

“...the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.” —Luke 22:24-30

Right Bank of St. Paul

Coach: Yolanda Isaac-Sie

DEO: Marcia C. Edward

Award: Fourth place

EGRA: A Marble

If you were in Virginia, the Hotel Africa area, from the beginning of 2008 to the present, you would agree that EGRA is like a marble that now shines through the reading skills of the students. Remember how a marble shines after it is set in the dirt floor?

EGRA began in the month of October 2008 in Liberia to help Liberian children learn how to read specifically in grades 2 and 3. I was there right at the beginning because I happened to be one of the fortunate ones to have been trained as an assessor.

The following schools were identified as schools where students had problems with their reading skills: Virginia Public, Augustus F. Caine, Bamboo Town, and William D. Coleman. During the initial assessment in November 2008, I was rather discouraged to realize that students in grades 2 and 3 could neither decode words nor read simple sentences. In short, these students did not know phonics. You could deduce that these problems were handed down by teachers who either were not available or could not teach these skills. I doubted that EGRA would make a difference in the lives of these Liberian children. But in December of the same year, after teachers were trained in the EGRA big five skills, students began to improve greatly. Then, the change came like magic. In a matter of a few months, I saw miracles taking place during the monthly visits.

Those teachers who [before] could not teach the big five skills in reading were now teaching it perfectly while students were responding to the sounds of letters like little parrots. Others were decoding words bit by bit. At the end of the school year, when the informal assessment was done, students from the targeted schools were reading excellently. Some recognized up to 89 letters per minute, while others read 70–73 words per minute, all with very high levels of comprehension. I could hear myself shouting “Oh, EGRA, what a magic reading program.”

This news is worthy because teachers have acquired brand-new knowledge that will last them forever if they continue to practice, while kids who have also acquired these skills will continue to grow and develop.

As a result of the enthusiasm for reading generated by the program, most of the treatment schools now have good libraries as opposed to before we got there. Also schools are now conducting monthly PTA meetings regularly since the EGRA program.

Through the eyes of faith I can see at the end of this program when our donors and friends at USAID, World Bank, RTI, and others shall have left, we the students, teachers, principals, the ministry of Education, and the Liberian government will say with pride: YES! WE DID IT TOGETHER.

I AM PROUD TO SAY EGRA IS A REAL MARBLE SHINING SUCCESSFULLY IN THE RIGHT BANK AREA OF SCHOOL DISTRICT #1 IN MONTESERRADO.

District Foya, Lofa County

Coach: Wellington Green

DEO: Richard Korsor; also Junior Korsor

Award: 5th place for commitment and endless enthusiasm

This Story Is About Mobilizing PTAs, Exceptional Teachers, and Exceptional Students

My district is qualified and successful in mobilizing PTAs. When I took over as a coach, most of the PTA meetings were not well attended, so I had to always stay overnight in any of the towns of my support and talk to PTAs about their importance to their school, ward, and community. I also asked the DEO to help me organize the PTA and have elections since these people were his people. After this intervention, PTA meetings became full during meeting time. Every month, the last Sunday is PTA meeting day.

Francis Saah from Borliloe Public School is an exceptional teacher. He always teaches the five basic skills in reading and plans his lessons before entering the class. He also models to the class whenever I am using the observation checklist. He also knows how to identify students who need help in his class. He also placed sight words on the wall in his class so as to make the children get used to these words. He also encourages students to make use of the library.

Overall, my DEO and I have an effective collaboration. He always calls on me to find out what is happening in my school and my location in the district. Every time he wants to pay a visit to me, he also promises teachers that he will ask EGRA to increase support visits to their schools. He also did well in reorganizing the PTA and communities, which is now a great help to the EGRA project. He himself is here in this workshop as evidence.

All of my full intervention schools have a reading club for both second and third graders. During my December 2009 visit to full-intervention schools, a student who never had any interest in reading is now asking me to be part of the reading club.

Salala District, Bong County

Compiled by: V. Varnell Kiazolu, EGRA Coach

DEO: Rev. Lakoilie Oneenzou

Award: This story was awarded 6th place for hard work

How It All Began

It all started with the teacher training workshop for full-intervention schools [in December 2008]. It was a difficult start, with the teachers protesting that they had been overlooked in the entire process. They lamented the [unfulfilled] promise by the deputy ministers of education concerning employment. [Volunteer teachers] were made to reapply for their jobs and what have you; everything had proven futile. It was claims and counterclaims, and it went on and on, stalling the process for about two hours. I allowed them to pour out their frustrations; vent their anger, before I took the stage.

With my background in conflict resolution and understanding of its dynamics, I took charge of the situation and employed those strategies needed to bring about a quick resolution. I further went on articulating the importance and advantages of EGRA to their very selves, the students, and the nation at large; that the money was not all there was to it.

After my engagement I realized that the tempo was beginning to mellow down and tranquility had already taken control sooner than I ever expected. The remaining days were all cordial and remarkable. The final day was just spectacular. It produced all the results that I had expected. The air was full of excitement; the local media was invited, teachers were interviewed whereby their views were aired. On this final day, we drafted a resolution that EGRA should be “owned”; the actual words were “own it.” Whether you are a teacher, administrator, student, community member, even a coach, own EGRA. We should go out there and carry the message to the rest of the community.

The following day I was invited to [the radio] studio to elaborate more on EGRA to the general public. I did not miss out on the opportunity to tell the listeners what makes EGRA tick. [Later] I was invited to the studio about three different times. In one of my interviews, I even asked the media to partner with me to propagate the issues of EGRA. The principals and DEO were also interviewed and their views aired. Until my departure for the workshop, I became referred to as “the EGRA man” in town. At least EGRA has caused reading to become an integral component of the educational process in these communities we are all assigned as coaches.

The USAID Director and her team’s visit to my [school] cluster

It was a surprise call: “The U.S. Ambassador will be visiting your district. Which of the schools would you like for her to visit?” asked my coordinator, Ollie White. I answered: “E. J. Yancy!” After the conversation, I was shocked and muddled. All I did was to put

my phone down and begin to recollect all that she told me, after scrutinizing it in my mind. I brought myself back to reality, prepared myself for the challenge I had to face.

The following day, I visited the proposed school, and broke the news to the school authority and my grade 2 and 3 teachers. We got to work, did all that we could pending the arrival of the EGRA team, headed by my dynamic coordinator, Ollie White. The team was very helpful and supportive in the process. I wanted to use this medium to express my thanks and appreciation to the team for their support. Later on I was informed that [it was] the USAID Director [who] was coming [rather than the Ambassador]. [This was a misunderstanding]

The D-Day finally came and the visitor arrived at about 8:00 a.m. Immediately we got the ball rolling. First it was the 2nd grade class and the later the 3rd grade class. Everything went on as we anticipated. I want to tag it “the biggest of all successes. A big boost to EGRA.” Later when we were together, Ollie White made a remark which I want to highlight: “You see what hard work does.” This was all about the hard work, she went on.

My honoring

During the workshop, the DEO said he was planning to honor some personalities working with him in the district, making the development of education a profundity. He did not disclose any names but I said that those individuals would be contacted in due time. To my surprise, I was one of those. And the platform was to be the E.J. Yancy high school graduation.

The day came and it was on the 29th of November 2009. When the moment came, I was filled with elation, and of course I am still basking in that euphoria. It was a colorful event, amidst lots of cheering. Truly it was the DEO who did me the honor. When I was [introduced], I vividly remember the remarks he made:

- That the teachers who were interviewed in my assigned schools told him that they wished I had come to stay longer.
- That they can now see students improving in reading, as compared to the past. This is evident from the emphasis the coach is placing on reading.
- Though EGRA is a new phenomenon, it is overwhelmingly accepted by the schools.
- The impact of EGRA is becoming more than expected.
- If EGRA is extended, it will start a reading revolution in our school system.

The success of EGRA with the schools

If I am to evaluate EGRA from a comparative, analytical point of view, based on my experience with all players involved, EGRA is quickly impacting the kids in so many ways.

- Kids who could not even recognize letters are doing so now with accuracy and speed.
- Letter sounds, beginning sounds, are becoming things of the past [i.e., “old” skills]; even decoding of words is getting to a place where the kids are getting more relaxed with it.
- There is also improvement with comprehension. They are getting to understand simple text.
- When it comes to exceptionally good kids, the number is increasing as their interest in EGRA is growing. Interestingly there are very young ones between ages of five and eight years old. They are mastering the EGRA concepts successfully
- You can now see kids going to the library for books (OYSS) that were provided by the project.
- Through the EGRA initiative, the PTAs in most schools are quickly revitalizing. I formulated a strategy called “tripartite responsibility” which means the school, the parents, and the community coming together in supporting the progress of students in a given community.

All is not yet well and done with; there are still some special challenges. We need to work more on speed and accuracy. Teachers’ attitudes [in the sense that they see EGRA as extra work] is still remaining, and the lack of anticipated support from parents is another area.

However, there are some strategies that I employed to resolve some of these challenges. For community awareness, I involved the media: Kids’ reading activities are recorded and played on the local radio on most Saturdays. I make myself available most of the time when I am invited to elaborate more on the modus operandi of EGRA activity in the district on the radio show. I have established a healthy working relationship with my teachers, school authorities, and DOE. Because of the serious problems with reading, I asked teachers to use sight words for spelling repeatedly.

I give all thanks and praises to the almighty God.

Voinjama District, Lofa County
DEO: Anthony Ansu Agoi
Award: Special award

Making Exciting Changes

Pupils have had some difficulties with the pronunciation of two-letter words: as, to, in, of, at, etc. As a result, building and pronouncing bigger words was very hard for students. What I did to overcome this was to build teachers' capacities by modeling lessons using nonsense words to build words. For example, words [such as] cat, fat, man, sat, tap, lap, etc. were modeled. Removing either the last or the first letters, I modeled : an, ta, la, at, fa, sa, ma, ca, etc. After pupils got the concept and sounds of these letters, I decided to call some familiar words and names and asked students to spell these using the nonsense words, and quickly hands were raised. I called the name of the River Cavalla, hands were again raised. They followed the sounds of the syllables and spelt it Cavala leaving out one "l." What they knew was that the syllable "la" is made up with the letters "l" and "a" instead of the double "ll." That was a good try anyway.

The students became very excited and started calling names like "mazata," "mazzati," "mamaya," and so forth. I then discovered that using other letters to make nonsense words would help them succeed in building bigger words. And we are making progress.

With regard to PTA formation, I have succeeded in organizing all PTAs except in one of my light intervention schools. The Kanela Public School has organized the best PTA in Voinjama District. This school and the 3rd grade students at the Lutisu Public School are doing tremendously well in reading.