FOOD FOR THE HUNGRY
EDUCATION

LESSONS FROM **LET'S LEARN TO READ**, A PILOT LITERACY PROGRAM IN BURUNDI

This brief focuses on lessons learned from the evaluation of a teacher training program in Burundi.

BACKGROUND

Let's Learn to Read is a new teacher training program designed to support educators of children in grades one through three in resource-lean contexts by providing a series of trainings on evidence-based instructional practices to teach reading. Teachers receive a series of training sessions on best practices for teaching the core reading skills — phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension — as well as ongoing mentoring and coaching. Food for the Hungry (FH) piloted this program in Burundi in partnership with the Ministry of Education from January–June, 2021. The initiative was in response to a 2018 study that showed poor levels of reading outcomes in FH operational areas in Burundi. In the study, only seven percent of nine-year-old children were able to meet third-grade literacy standards. In addition to teacher training, this project provided textbooks and reading materials in the Kirundi language to implementation schools. The evaluation focused on the impact of the Let's Learn to Read program activities on the following indicators:

- Proportion of first graders able to read frequently used words
- Proportion of second graders able to read simple complete sentences
- Proportion of third graders able to read and understand a grade-level text

LESSONS LEARNED

Short-term interventions (six months or less) can make an impact on lower-level reading skills, such as word reading and decoding. Strategies for teaching letter knowledge, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, and fluency were used effectively in pilot classrooms, resulting in statistically significant increases in the proportion of children who are able to read frequently used words and simple sentences.

Sufficient time must be allocated for teachers to practice and implement comprehension strategies, as this is the most complex skill to teach. Reports from the field indicated that teachers struggled with asking different types of comprehension questions such as literal, inferential, and evaluative, which is a best practice for building comprehension skills.

Teachers benefit from ongoing training, coaching, and mentoring. Let's Learn to Read combined in-person training workshops with classroom visits and ongoing communication with training facilitators through WhatsApp. Each training session was followed immediately by a classroom visit, where teachers were able to implement strategies learned in the training and receive immediate feedback and coaching from the facilitators.

EVALUATION DESIGN

A randomized controlled trial was implemented to assess the impact of the **Let's Learn to Read** intervention on children's reading skills. In the intervention group, children were exposed to the Let's Learn to Read intervention, and in the control group, children were not exposed to the intervention. For this study, schools in the Busoni geographic area, which had historically shown low education indicators in previous studies, were chosen as the intervention group. Schools with a similar context in the Bugabira geographic area were chosen as the control group. Using the Citizen-Led Assessment, children's literacy skills were assessed before the program and after the program in both control and intervention groups. Children were randomly selected from the classrooms of teachers in grades one through three, using stratified random sampling. Schools were the unit of assignment, so all children in the schools were assigned together to the control schools or treatment schools.

RESULTS

Let's Learn to Read had positive impacts on children's reading outcomes. After six months of teacher training, evaluators determined that the pilot program was effective in improving the proportion of children who could read frequently used words and simple sentences. Improved results were not seen in comprehension skills due to the fact that teachers were only trained on comprehension strategies in the final month of the project. They had insufficient time to implement these strategies in the classroom before the endline evaluation took place.
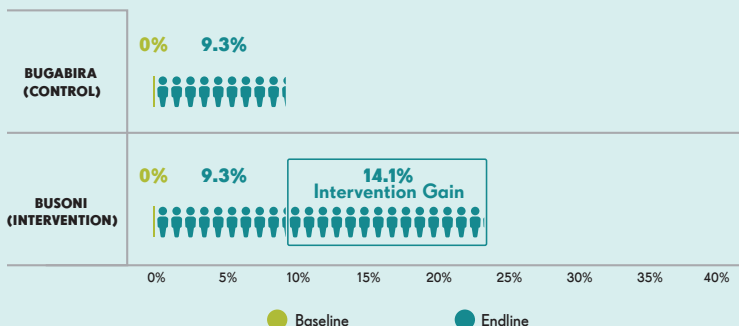
Schools in the intervention group gained more children in first grade who could read frequently used words than schools in the control group. Schools in the intervention group gained more children in second grade who could read simple sentences than did the comparison group. Comprehension skills did not improve in the intervention group as compared to schools in the control group.
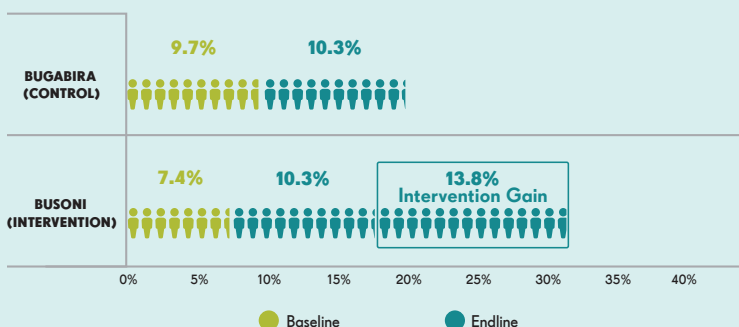
GENDER

In schools using the **Let's Learn to Read** program, the increase in proportion of children who could read frequently used words was 21% for girls and 26% for boys, compared to 9% for girls and 10% for boys in schools that did not receive Let's Learn to Read. The increase in the proportion of children who could read simple complete sentences in schools using Let's Learn to Read was 22% for girls and 26% for boys, compared to 14% for girls and 6% for boys in schools that did not receive Let's Learn to Read.

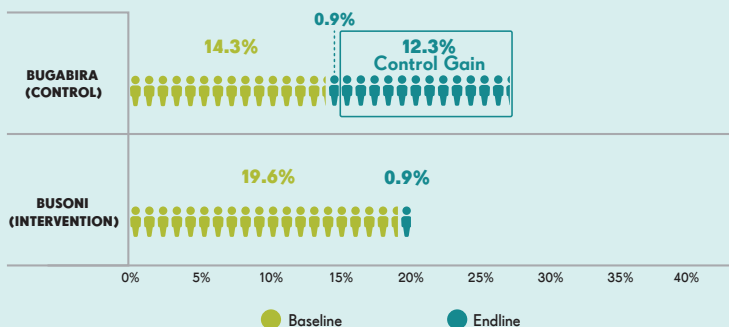## PROPORTION OF FIRST GRADERS ABLE TO READ FREQUENTLY USED WORDS

BUGABIRA (CONTROL) — 0%   9.3%

BUSONI (INTERVENTION) — 0%   9.3%   14.1% Intervention Gain

0% 5% 10% 15% 20% 25% 30% 35% 40%

● Baseline   ● Endline

The difference in gain between the control and intervention groups is 14.1%, (p=0.0006), which is statistically significant (p<0.05).

PROPORTION OF SECOND GRADERS ABLE TO READ SIMPLE, COMPLETE SENTENCES

BUGABIRA (CONTROL) — 9.7%   10.3%

BUSONI (INTERVENTION) — 7.4%   10.3%   13.8% Intervention Gain

0% 5% 10% 15% 20% 25% 30% 35% 40% 4

● Baseline   ● Endline

The difference in gain between the control and intervention groups is 13.8%, (p=0.043) which is statistically significant (p<0.05).

PROPORTION OF THIRD GRADERS ABLE TO READ AND UNDERSTAND A GRADE-LEVEL TEXT

BUGABIRA (CONTROL) — 14.3%   0.9%   12.3% Control Gain

BUSONI (INTERVENTION) — 19.6%   0.9%

0% 5% 10% 15% 20% 25% 30% 35% 40%

● Baseline   ● Endline

The difference in gain between the control and intervention groups is 12.3%, (p=0.155) which is not statistically significant (p>0.05).