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CREATIVE

TEACHER MOTIVATION AND CHANGE IN YEMEN

**Innovations in Teacher Professional Development from
the Yemen Early Grade Reading Approach (YEGRA)**

Creative Associates International | March 2015



This report outlines some of the innovations and practices in the professional development of grades 1-3 teachers in the USAID's Community Livelihoods Program support to Yemen's Ministry of Education for improved early grade reading. This report covers the initial design and implementation of the Yemen Early Grade Reading Approach (YEGRA) during the 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 academic years.

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The Yemen Early Grade Reading Approach was one of the first USAID-funded early grade reading programs in the Arab World.

Introduction

The USAID-funded Community Livelihoods Program (CLP) was launched by Creative Associates International in August 2010 with the aim of providing multi-sectoral development support for improved stability in Yemen. Although a number of the early CLP initiatives were originally planned to be short-term small grants that served the strategic purpose of improving relations between communities and the Yemeni government, the program focused mainly on long-term projects designed to build sustainable systems that would address the drivers of instability (e.g., high youth unemployment rates, inadequate health care, low adult literacy rates,

low access to and poor quality of education, poor delivery of government services). At the start of the program, CLP had five sectoral teams (Agriculture, Education, Economic Growth, Good Governance, and Health) addressing the need for stabilization.

The Community Livelihoods Program's education component was initially designed around community-based activities such as supporting adult literacy centers, improving and rehabilitating schools, and providing school supplies to students. In late 2011, the education team in consultation with USAID started to align programming more close-

ly with USAID's Education Strategy (2011) to focus on early grade reading (EGR). CLP initiated dialogue with Yemen's Ministry of Education to implement teacher development programs aimed at improving reading performance of grades 1-3 students. The first such EGR activity built on a previous USAID program—Basic Education Support and Training project (BEST)—and included the training of 4,000 primary teachers in 4 governorates ('Adan, Lahij, Ta'izz, and Sana'a) on reading-to-learn skills. Education Ministry officials were impressed with the participatory nature and effectiveness of the training

program. Poor student performance on international tests, including TIMSS¹ and EGRA, further strengthened the ministry's resolve to address the poor state of teaching reading in Arabic in the early grades. In consultation with USAID and CLP staff, the Ministry of Education (MOE) asked for CLP's support in designing a program to address the weaknesses in students' foundational reading skills.

In early 2012, the Minister of Education appointed a team of more than 30 MOE officials to work full-time on the program with CLP. Together with this team of curriculum developers, Arabic specialists,



across many directorates, there is a high degree of program ownership by the Yemenis.

Taking into account Yemen's complex political, economic, and educational challenges, particularly after the 2011 conflict, the rollout of YEGRA in 2012 could neither be more timely nor pertinent. Political instability and weak governance as a result of the conflict have led to deteriorating conditions for access and quality in the education system in Yemen. Schools, particularly in the southern governorates, were severely damaged, destroyed, or looted, which led to increased rates of student and teacher absenteeism. As a result of the conflict, more than 64,000 children under 14 years of age were displaced and 13,000 school teachers and managers were apprehended. The presence of Al-Qaeda (AQAP), tribal conflict, and multiple secessionist movements further complicate the context for developing an early grade reading reform. Yemen's transitional government, following the resignation of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, is now being presented with both

a challenge and an unprecedented opportunity for system strengthening and education reform. With the understanding that education can promote stability and mitigate the root causes of conflict, the Community Livelihoods Program addresses both issues of access and quality in partnership with the Ministry of Education. It aims to build a cadre of qualified teachers and education professionals at all levels who are equipped with the skills and knowledge to support the literacy development of Yemeni students.

This report describes some of the challenges to teacher professional development for early grade reading during the first year (2012-2013) of YEGRA and how they were overcome through innovation leading to teacher motivation and change. As one of the first USAID-funded early grade reading programs in the Arab world, after Girls' Improved Learning Outcomes (GILO) in Egypt, we hope that the lessons learned from our successes and challenges will inform future work in the region.



reading specialists, subject supervisors, teacher trainers, professors, gender specialists, community-participation specialists, graphic designers, and artists, CLP developed a phonics-based approach to learning to read in grades 1-3 that included a scope and sequence, teachers' guide, teaching and learning materi-

als, students' book, continuous assessment tools, and coaching and supervision approaches. The Yemen Early Grade Reading Approach (YEGRA), as it became known, is now the core intervention of CLP. Because the program is designed and implemented in collaboration with Yemen's Ministry of Education at all levels and

Profile of Early Grade Teachers in Yemen

Only 30% of Yemen's teaching force is women. In the early grades, however, this figure is considerably higher at 51%. These teachers are among the lowest paid in the system, and based on regional comparisons, they are also among the least trained. Considered to be *less professionalized*, only 40% of early grade teachers hold a bachelor's degree, just 54% have teaching qualifications, and nearly 70% have never participated in any in-service teacher professional devel-

opment. Effective in-service teacher training is necessary to build the knowledge and skills around curriculum, pedagogy, and classroom management, but the teacher-training institutes where primary teachers have traditionally been trained are now closed and university education departments have yet to deliver a dedicated training program for primary teachers.

The poor quality of instruction in Yemen is further

exacerbated by the fact that 50% of the early grade teaching force is located in urban schools where classroom overcrowding—at times exceeding 100 students per class—necessitates double shifts to accommodate all the children. With teaching time in a day for primary students fixed at approximately three hours, double shifts reduce this time to even less than that. The quality of instruction provided in rural schools—with the recent trend towards hiring low-qual-

ified contract teachers (particularly in the lower grades)—is ostensibly no better. However, despite what looked like a dismal starting point for launching a reading reform, the results of the YEGRA programs have nonetheless proven extremely positive: Yemeni teachers in grades 1-4 have embraced the new methods—recognizing the powerful effects the program has on learning—and have implemented the program with marked success in improving students' reading abilities.

Theories of Teacher Motivation and Change

Theories of teacher motivation and change have been useful in both the design and review of the YEGRA Program. Three key theoretical perspectives are outlined here as these were the most powerful tools in thinking about the design of the program.

Michael Fullan (2006) posits that most of the change in teacher beliefs, attitudes, and practices is connected to teacher motivation, whether individual or collective. He notes that when teachers change, they also change the context in which they work. This change in context (generally considered to be the school), in turn impacts the system in which they work. Teacher change, according to Fullan, must include capacity

building in which skills and new knowledge are gained. Also, teachers must be reflective in a way that leads to action or change in their teaching practices. Teacher professional development that involves teacher reflection without the actual testing of new ideas in the classroom leads to much discussion but little change in the way teachers teach. For meaningful change to occur, there needs to be a systemic shift whereby school administrators and supervisors are engaged in the process, communities have a role to play in supporting teacher change, and systemic changes support the proposed new teaching practices. Lastly, Fullan notes that change is not easy and that for teachers to grow and develop,

they—and those working with them—need to be flexible and persistent. Change takes place at different rates and in different ways for teachers.

According to **Thomas Guskey** (2002), a prevailing view regarding teacher change is that collaborative teacher input on the kinds of training required will ensconce a change in attitudes and beliefs from the beginning. While it is important to have input from teachers early on, this alone, he argues, will not change beliefs. It is “the experience of successful implementation that changes teachers' attitudes and beliefs” (p. 383). Teachers must be able to see evidence of positive change in student learning for significant change to take

place. In YEGRA, teachers experienced improved student learning outcomes during the initial training.

Ken Tobin (1990) argues that understanding teachers' beliefs about what is being taught and how it is being taught are fundamental to teacher change. By finding out what beliefs teachers hold and what metaphors they use, those involved in professional development may be able to influence and change the way teachers teach. Through dialogue and group discussions conducted during training, beliefs about the teaching of reading in Arabic were revealed and addressed. Some of these beliefs are illustrated in the graph to the right..

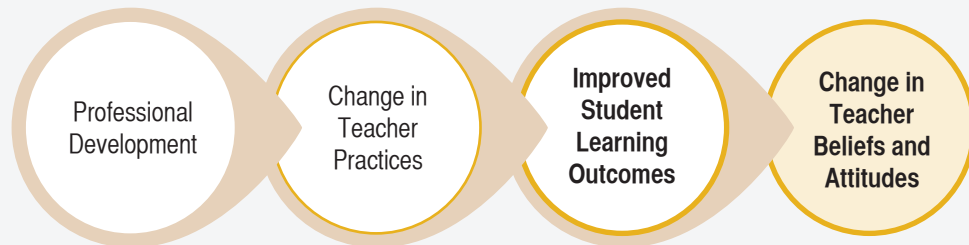
Fullan



Core Premises for Teacher Change

1. Focus on motivation
2. Capacity building
3. Learning in context
4. Changing context
5. Reflective action
6. Tri-level engagement
7. Persistence and flexibility in staying the course

Guskey



“Teachers don’t fundamentally change their beliefs and attitudes until they see improvement in student learning.”

-Guskey

Tobin

Driving Beliefs

- Reading is the key to learning
- All children can learn to read
- Reading is enjoyable
- Teaching reading is important in early grades
- Teachers believe the Harakat is needed in early grades

Change

Restraining Beliefs

- Reading doesn’t start until upper grades
- Knowing how to speak Arabic means it is easy to learn to read
- Memorizing words and stories is the same as reading
- Memorizing first, meanin later
- Choral reading while teacher points to words or stories shows learners are reading

No Change



Early grade teachers in Yemen are among the lowest paid in the system—and among the least trained. Only 54 percent have teaching qualifications and fewer than one third have received professional development.

Overview: Teacher Professional Development for YEGRA

In early 2012, Yemen's Minister of Education appointed more than 30 education professionals from across the country to participate in the design, development, planning, and training of teachers for the new reading program. Within six months a new program for teaching reading in the early grades was developed with input from CLP reading experts: the scope and sequence, teachers' guides, student books, training manuals, continuous assessment instruments and procedures, process for the selection of trainers, orientation of governorate and district officials, and training of supervisors on classroom

observation, constructive feedback, and coaching had been completed.

The first phase of the YEGRA program was launched November 2012 through May 2013 in 383 schools in Sana'a, Amanat Al-Asimah, Ta'izz, Amran, Lahij, Hajjah, and Adan governorates. Training was successfully completed for 48 master trainers, 416 teacher trainers, 2,964 teachers, 514 school directors and school social workers, and over 23,000 parents. By November 2012 more than 120,000 students were participating in the new program.

With continued support

from USAID, Phase II of the program was implemented in the 2013-2014 academic year, the project at this time having been expanded into 511 additional schools. Since program start-up, the CLP and MOE YEGRA team has revised and improved the materials and implementation strategies based on first-year experience. These changes include aligning more closely with the MOE curriculum, launching a media campaign, and strengthening teachers' communities of practice. By the completion of the project in 2015, the program will have reached more than 1.5 million grades 1-3 students as the program is scaled up

nationwide.

In the first trial year of YEGRA, teachers were trained for 17 days:³ an initial 14-day training for Part I and a 3-day refresher course for Part II during the second semester. Part I, which consists of training in the first semester of the school year, provides teachers with the foundational skills and knowledge for teaching early grade reading (EGR). Supported by a systematic research-based methodology, teachers are trained to utilize an explicit phonics approach that includes letter-sounds that can be blended, sight words, and read-aloud stories with



“When more Yemeni children attend school and learn to read, they are better able to contribute to this great nation—as knowledgeable and skilled citizens. This is our dream.” – Herbie Smith, USAID Mission Director to Yemen

vocabulary and comprehension questions. The training is designed to coincide with lessons for the academic school year, with Part I, for example, introducing only first-semester teaching content so that the training is relevant and timely. In Part II of the training program, which takes place in the second semester, teachers move from teaching some of the most commonly used Arabic letters to some of the more difficult. This approach enables teachers to see immediate gains in the first semester and builds momentum and motivation for further engagement.

The program is designed

specifically for teaching the Arabic language and geared to the readiness level of Yemeni students. The CLP team aimed to build a program that enabled success under challenging conditions, one that could work within a classroom environment where teachers confront multiple shifts, diverse learning needs, and minimal resources. Through the training program, teachers are taught to differentiate instruction in the classroom and conduct student diagnostics using the Teachers’ Early Grade Reading Assessment (T’EGRA) and the Teachers’ Early Grade Writing Assessment (T’EGWA) so they can effectively meet the needs

of learners.

YEGRA aims to build a system to effectively implement early grade reading in Yemen. By utilizing an enhanced cascade approach that mitigates the dilution factors of a cascade model, the program also aims to increase teachers’ fidelity to the YEGRA model of teaching reading by 1) providing structured training manuals and teacher guides, 2) training in authentic contexts, and 3) ensuring that trainers are selected on the basis of merit. In this way the program can build a cadre of master trainers and teacher trainers who can consistently deliver quality training

to teachers on a large scale.

Professional development takes place at the school and cluster level through scheduled trainings, classroom observations, and coaching. Teaching approaches are modeled over the course of the training program to demonstrate how teachers can continuously engage students and maintain a high level of interest through positive reinforcement. The student-centered methodology is designed so that teachers encourage students to transition from rote memorization as the only mode of learning to a focus on comprehension and critical thinking.



YEGRA's student-centered methodology is designed so teachers focus on comprehension and critical thinking instead of rote memorization.

Assessing Teacher Motivation and Change

How do we know that teachers were motivated to teach the new YEGRA program and that they changed their practice (Table 1)? What impact did this changed practice have on student reading outcomes? During the first year of the program (2012-2013 academic year) a comparative study (Table 2) and action research were conducted to answer these questions. The quasi-experimental design compared 45 schools implementing YEGRA and 45 that were using the existing MOE Arabic curriculum. The study assessed learner reading achievement and teacher skills in teaching reading and captured other important data at the baseline and end line of the first year of implementation. The action research focused only on the schools implementing YEGRA and included findings from classroom observations, interviews, and focus group discussions with teachers, students, school

directors, supervisors, and parents.

At the outset, the program aimed at ensuring that teachers were applying the new phonics-based methods as close to the designed approach as possible. The program expected that learning outcomes in reading and writing would be higher in schools implementing YEGRA than those that were not. Even with less than a full academic year of using the YEGRA (due to periodic school closures and delays in program start-up) and relatively weak performance of students overall on the baseline (when compared regionally), the students in the YEGRA schools showed marked gains in reading and writing as compared to students using the existing MOE curriculum in grades 1 and 2. Students in the YEGRA (intervention) schools improved in all areas as compared to students in the control schools. Importantly, students' initial-sound comprehension, letter-sound knowledge,

and familiar-word reading (key foundational skills for nonreaders to move to reading fluency) improved at markedly higher rates than those in the control schools. There was a 264% change in the ability to identify initial sounds in the YEGRA schools compared with only a 39% change in the control schools. Letter-sound knowledge, an important foundational skill that leads to decoding and fluency, showed an even larger gain among the YEGRA students: 366 percent improvement over baseline compared with 110% improvement over baseline in the schools using the existing MOE curriculum.

Three Student Learning Gains: Intervention Versus Control Schools⁴

Teachers' skills over the period of the intervention were measured (Table 2) by classroom observations in 45 intervention

Table 1

Teaching Skills for Grade 1 Teachers ⁵	Control	Intervention
Guiding students to identify differences and similarities of sounds	37.0%	72.1%
Teaching phonics daily	64.4%	97.8%
Discussing meaning of vocabulary words	54.3%	81.4%
Reading stories to students daily	4.4%	41.3%

Table 2

YEGRA Measures	Intervention Schools (Mean Score)			Control Schools (Mean Score)		
	Baseline	Final	% Change	Baseline	Final	% Change
Initial-Sound Identification	0.94	3.42	+ 264%	1.01	1.40	+ 39%
Letter-Sound Knowledge	3.49	16.28	+ 366%	2.88	6.06	+ 110%
Familiar-Word Reading	0.33	2.43	+ 636%	0.32	1.27	+ 297%

schools and 45 control schools (where the teachers did not have the YEGRA training nor the ongoing professional support). A key component of the YEGRA program is that teachers teach the phonics approach every day for at least 20 minutes as per the YEGRA lesson plans. At the end line, 97.8% of the YEGRA teachers were found to teach phonics as compared to 64.4% of the teachers in the control schools. This significant gap in teaching skill is likely to account for the large difference in letter-sound improvement between YEGRA students and control students (as shown above). Reading aloud to students helps to develop phonemic awareness (initial-sound identification) and listening comprehension, both foundational reading skills. In YEGRA, read-aloud stories appear in the lessons every second or third day depending on the lesson schedule over the course of the year. Control-school

teachers read to students daily an average of 4.4% of the time, whereas the intervention teachers read to students daily an average of 41.3% of the time (an estimate roughly consistent with the lesson plans).



Qualitative evidence from the Action Research Report from this period (Community Livelihoods Project, 8 October 2013) also points to positive teacher change and increased motivation. Analysis of a Teacher Performance Observation Checklist

(TPOC) by supervisors in support of 679 teachers in 6 governorates at the end of the school year (May 2013) found that 73% of YEGRA teachers performed in the *good or better* category on providing independent reading-aloud time for students. This is compared with only 44.1% of YEGRA teachers having students read aloud independently at the beginning of the year (ibid., p.21-22). Videos and classroom observations of control schools show virtually no independent reading aloud by students at the beginning or end of the school year.

Additionally, based on findings from focus group discussions, the Action Research Report noted that teacher absenteeism had dropped for the YEGRA teachers studied and that the teachers had “in general improved their practice.” One supervisor reported: “Teachers have been more effective with YEGRA than they have ever been” (ibid., p.22).

Key Features in YEGRA Teacher Motivation and Change

A number of key features have brought about the positive changes in teacher motivation and practice in Yemen. Within the context of MOE ownership and engagement in the program—and in accordance with the theories of teacher motivation and change and proven strategies for teacher professional development—the nine key features are summarized below:

1. Training in Authentic Contexts

Master trainers, trainers, and teachers are all trained in authentic contexts. In practice this means that training is held with grades 1-3 students in actual classroom settings. In the case of master trainers and trainers, students from the school where training is scheduled to take place are invited to come to the training for 3-4 days and the master trainers and trainers try out the approach with children who decide to attend. For teachers, the training activities take place during the school term at a cluster school in close proximity to their home school. Using what has been dubbed the *sandwich approach*, teachers come to the cluster center for the training session before or after their morning or afternoon shift (whichever they are teaching). At this time, they are introduced to a new topic. When the teachers return to their classroom, whether it is that afternoon or the next morning, they try out the new methods in the classroom with support from the trainers and supervisors. Reflective discussions on practicing the new methods are held in the next training session before additional new methods are introduced. One of the major benefits of the sandwich approach to training is that teachers see immediate improvements

in student reading ability as a result of the approach. Witnessing improvement is an important factor noted by Guskey in changing teacher beliefs and gaining their commitment to the new method. In addition, the highly localized model creates a community linkage that builds support from local stakeholders. As trainers and



teachers are selected from the area, there is an increased sense of accountability to the community and support to create a culture of YEGRA. All these elements of the approach are important for creating local ownership and ensuring security.

In an effort to address the shortage of teachers and classrooms, the Yemeni government has implemented multiple shifts (double and triple) at schools to accommodate rising rates of enrollment. Adding to this burden, the MOE's usual

approach to in-service teacher training involves taking teachers out of the classroom for multiple full-day sessions, a practice highly discouraged by school directors. And since there are no professional development requirements for Yemeni teachers, even when trainings are provided during the summer holiday period, teacher participation remains low. Taking these factors into account, the CLP-YEGRA team in collaboration with the Ministry of Education designed a training model that not only keeps teachers in their classrooms during training periods but also utilizes the time teachers spend in the classroom for authentic training purposes. Under YEGRA, classroom teaching is a complementary part of the sandwich model of training. While the sandwich model is commonly used in all governorates, it can be difficult in particularly isolated areas for teachers and trainers to travel to the training location and back to their respective schools each day. In such cases, teachers are provided with ten consecutive days of training followed by four consecutive days of classroom supervision and support.

2. Understanding the Rationale for YEGRA and its Methods

As good practice in training teachers,



In less than one school year, children learning with YEGRA improved their letter-sound knowledge, an important foundational skill that leads to decoding and fluency, by 366 percent.

it is important to explain to teachers why a reform is being introduced and why the particular approach has been selected. Providing this clarification helps teachers to examine their beliefs about teaching reading and how learners learn to read in Arabic. In addition, it sets the stage for a motivational shift to take place whereby teachers become increasingly engaged in the program as their beliefs become aligned with the approaches. In Yemen, the training of teachers includes a discussion about how learning to read in the early grades improves chances of success

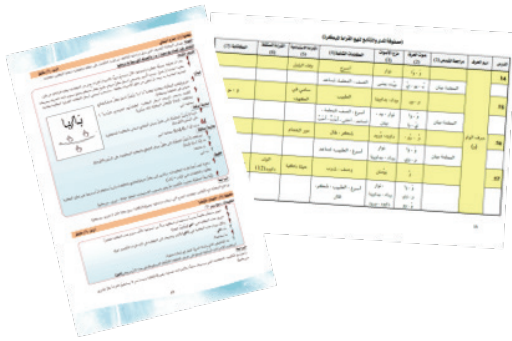
in reading and other subjects in the upper grades. What the graft shows is what teachers in Yemen already know from experience—that when children do not learn to read in grade 1, they will continue to struggle to read and to learn other subjects in the upper grades. In Yemen this pattern has particularly disastrous results as there are few remedial teachers in the schools to support children who cannot read in the upper grades. The frustration associated with learning failures in the later grades leads to drop out from school, particularly for girls. Boys also drop out during this pe-

riod, leading some to join groups engaged in conflict.

Teachers in Yemen have also come to realize that reading in the early grades is the key to future success, in school and out of school. In reference to the program, teachers and education officials were frequently heard commenting, “This is the answer!” When asked which question this is the answer to, they would often reply: “Our future!” Furthermore, teachers seem to understand that the phonics approach and the seven-step YEGRA method make pedagogical sense. Many teachers

had been surreptitiously adding *harakat* (diacritical marks) into the existing MOE textbooks to guide them in teaching prior to the introduction of YEGRA. Many were also supplementing the teaching of reading by using the *Baghdadia* approach, a phonics-based approach used in mosques and schools throughout Yemen (and the Arabic-speaking world) in the 1970s.

3. Structured Teaching Guides



Unskilled teachers who have rarely participated in professional development since they started teaching are provided scaffolding to guide them to teach in new ways. The teacher guides for grade 1 include daily scripted lesson plans for the year which are structured into 7 steps.⁶ They also include a scope and sequence, seven T'EGRA (Teachers' Early Grade Reading Assessment) and seven T'EGWA (Teachers' Early Grade Writing Assessment) assessments (administered on an individual basis after approximately one month of teaching), a calendar of implementation, materials and guidance on engaging parents to support their children's reading, and observation forms for their own coaching sessions with supervisors. In Yemen the structured materials are generally very well received by teachers, with even private-school teachers photocopying the materials for use in their own schools.

4. Training that is Long Enough

Training has to be long enough for teachers to assimilate the new knowledge and understandings, practice the skills with feedback, and feel confident to try what they have learned in their classrooms. In Yemen this stipulation means that Phase 1 training is 17 days in a year—the first 14 days at the beginning of the program and 3 days' refresher on previous training content and introduction to second-semester material. The training content includes the rationale for the program, new methods, the purpose and nature of supervision visits, and the setup of professional learning communities at the school; it also includes how to use the teachers' guide and teaching aids, make additional teaching aids, implement the seven-step approach, carry out continuous assessment, provide remedial teaching, and engage parents to support their children's reading.

5. Four-Wheel-Drive Approach to Teacher Support

Just as a car with all-wheel drive is able to maintain traction under harsh road conditions, a teacher with a diversified support base is more likely to be effective within the resource-constrained classroom. The *four-wheel-drive* approach was designed to provide a school-based system for teacher support: all grades 1-3 teachers—as well as all the school directors, headmasters, supervisors, and social workers—are trained on the YEGRA methods with the aim of creating a critical mass of teachers and practitioners who can support each other in trying out the new practice.

Although the program was designed for grade 1, it was decided that all grades 1-3 teachers would receive training in order to access the large number of nonread-

ers in grades 2 and 3.⁷ Not only does this practice promote among primary grade teachers a shared understanding of the types of instruction used in grade 1, it also enhances teacher mobility, allowing teachers to move fluidly from one grade to another in the same school year. Supervisors, headmasters, and social workers also receive training on early grade reading, plus two days' training on teacher supervision and support, which includes classroom observations, coaching, and constructive feedback. In addition, school directors and social workers are trained on how to manage parental engagement in supporting the school and their child's reading at home.

6. Developing Communities of Practice

The YEGRA team uses a phased approach to develop communities of practice for trainers and teachers to avoid overloading them in the first year when the goal is to introduce new teaching methods and gauge teacher openness to change. YEGRA utilizes social media in the form of Facebook⁸ to engage with teachers, school directors, trainers, and social workers, providing them regularly with tips and guidance that complement the coaching and training program. The platform encourages interaction and collaboration among participants—here, practitioners can share ideas, innovations, and lessons learned. Currently, the YEGRA Facebook page has over 1,000 users posting or viewing videos, photos, materials, and MOE circulars and information. (Following suit, several governorates have also opened their own Facebook page.) In addition to Facebook, the program also utilizes text messaging to provide training information and motivational messages to teachers and other training participants. A



More than 30 officials from Yemen's Ministry of Education worked full-time with Creative and subject matter experts to develop the Yemen Early Grade Reading Approach.

“Teachers are a priority focus on the MOE agenda as they are the pillar on which new generations and civilizations are built.”

– Abdulrazaq Al Ashwal, Former Minister of Education, Yemen¹⁰

YouTube⁹ channel has been established where teachers and others can view YEGRA documentaries, training videos, public service announcements, TV talk shows about YEGRA, and other informational and inspirational material.

These venues for communication keep teachers from feeling isolated in their trial of the YEGRA program. Rather, they feel

part of the process of change in Yemen and as a result are instilled with a higher sense of professionalism and moral purpose. That the Minister of Education has given high praise to early grade teachers has also added to their sense of playing an important role in society.

In Phase II of implementation, the CLP-YEGRA team aimed to build a more

structured approach to developing communities of practice. At the school level, YEGRA engaged primary teachers, head teachers, and social workers through professional development meetings. These structured meetings guide teachers and their colleagues through reflective exercises that lead to improved classroom practices.

One Action Research Report noted that teacher absenteeism had dropped for teachers using YEGRA.

A supervisor reported: "Teachers have been more effective with YEGRA than they have ever been."



7. School-Based Coaching

A two-cycle coaching model involving master trainers, teacher trainers, and district supervisors was developed to provide support to teachers after the initial and refresher trainings. The coaching model is constructive, supportive, and aimed at assisting teachers to stay true to the approach. The two cycles are described as follows:

Cycle 1 (Day 1 of school visit)

A MT, ToT, or district supervisor aims to build a more structured approach to developing communities of practice. At the school level, a supervisor observes YEGRA grades 1, 2, and 3 teachers and completes a Teacher Performance Observation Checklist (TPOC). The supervisor then conducts a post-observation discussion with the teacher. The teacher is coached and encouraged to reflect on the lesson. A specific area the teacher needs to work on for improvement is identified. The key question the teacher must answer is "what should I do next that will improve my teaching of YEGRA?" The answer is then documented on the TPOC.

Cycle 2 (Day 2 of school visit)

The following day, the same observer returns to conduct another observation of the teacher. The observer notes whether or not the teacher is able to improve his/her teaching by implementing the plan from the previous day. After the lesson, another post-observation discussion is conducted. The observer encourages the teacher to REFLECT on the lesson and whether he/she was able to successfully implement the plan and improve. The observer again provides coaching advice. A specific area that the teacher needs to work on for improvement is identified by again asking, "what should I do next that will improve my teaching of YEGRA?" As before, the response is documented on the teacher performance observation checklist.

This process is ideally repeated monthly to help teachers become more reflective about their teaching and students' learning. The observer focuses on describing observable behavior without attaching judgment and accusations and provides immediate (timely) feedback to the teacher. This process provides support for YEGRA

teachers to try out new ways of teaching early grade reading and get feedback on how they applied them in the classroom.

8. Transparency in Teacher and Trainer Selection

It is common practice for education officials in Yemen to favor colleagues, relatives, and friends when appointing trainers or selecting teachers to attend training activities. Monetary benefits are the main motive. This favoritism results in the wrong people being sent to train or be trained and capacity building being misplaced at best, insignificant and wasteful at worst. Consequently, teachers and others in the education system perceive the system to be corrupt and not transparent. In post-Arab Spring Yemen, the MOE and CLP team felt it was imperative to be transparent in all processes and activities as a way of building confidence in the system. To ensure this transparency, a selection committee, comprising MOE officials and CLP staff, oversees the evaluation and selection process for Master Trainers (MTs) and Teacher Trainers (ToTs). Under Phase I, international literacy experts trained the MTs and ToTs and conducted rigorous post-training performance evaluations for each candidate. The evaluation process includes a written test, interviews, and demonstration of training skills. Using a scoring rubric created and approved by the MOE, the top percentile is selected to serve as MTs, and the median percentile is selected for the ToT role. Points are given for level of education, subject of expertise, years of experience, and current job position. To maintain high standards of quality, trainees not meeting performance standards are removed from the program. To protect against nepotism and bribery, the selection criteria has been outlined and publicized in a decree issued by the Minister of Education. In addition to the basic

criteria, ToTs and MTs are selected from the targeted governorates to decrease transportation costs and improve sustainability. The selection committee also aims to facilitate gender equity by encouraging women to apply and reducing degree standards for women.

The selection of grades 1-3 teachers to attend the YEGRA training was also considered a potential flashpoint for corruption. One common practice is for school directors to send favored teachers, friends, and even school secretaries for training so that they might benefit from the daily allowance provided to each participant. To avoid this potentially disastrous practice, the Minister issued a decree to all schools involved in YEGRA that mandated that only full-time, MOE-appointed teachers for grades 1-3 are eligible for training. To enforce the decree at school level and to foster sustainability, CLP and MOE request that teachers and headmasters sign a letter stating that teachers will continue to teach in early grades (and not transfer to higher grades) and will remain at the school to which they have been assigned for at least three years. By making a commitment to contribute skills in the class-

room, CLP ensures that YEGRA's training of teachers will continue to support student learning in the long term.

9. Conflict and Gender Sensitivity

Though education can stabilize and support progress, if provision is inequitable it can also exacerbate a fragile situation. Thus it is important that when providing teacher training, developing materials, and engaging communities, the program does so in a manner that does not promote exclusion within nor outside the classroom. When the USAID and the MOE selected which governorates would participate in the start-up of the YEGRA program, they chose those with large urban populations and potential for stabilization by quality government service delivery. In selecting the trial schools for the program, MOE and governorate officials chose entire districts in a governorate to participate to generate a critical mass moving forward on the reform.

Girls in Yemen face a greater number of barriers in accessing schools than boys face, greater even than girls in other low-income countries. The primary school net attendance rate for girls is estimated

at 53% in rural areas and 80% in urban areas (Ministry of Health and Population and UNICEF 2008: 100). Particularly in areas of high insecurity, girls are forced to withdraw earlier and do so with greater likelihood than their male counterparts.

The Community Livelihoods Program's focus on maintaining gender equity in the corps of trained teachers is supported by research that shows that access to female teachers can support girls' enrollment and reduce attrition. As 71% of teachers are male in Yemen, it is critical to enhance the skills of and promote female teachers in the school system. In the past, having to travel for long distances often deterred female teachers from attending trainings and professional development opportunities. The school and cluster-based training model offers a more viable alternative and has proven to increase participation for female teachers and trainers. Finally, the training has been designed to be participatory so that teachers, school directors, supervisors, and social workers from various backgrounds are engaged and contribute to the training process.

Conclusion



YEGRA aims to strengthen the Ministry of Education's technical capacity to deliver quality education services in the area of Early Grade Reading from the national to the community level. As the MOE works to improve the quality of service delivery, the YEGRA team works hand-in-hand to

support their efforts. Engaging with the teacher corps to provide them with the skills and knowledge required for long-term impact is a key aim of the Community Livelihoods Program. The YEGRA program has shown promising results in its first year of implementation, particularly in the area of

teacher motivation and change and student achievement in reading in Arabic. These results have been achieved through an attention to theory and best practice in teacher professional development, evidence-based approaches to early grade reading, and innovations that are conflict and gender sensitive.

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PHOTO BY MOHAMMAD AL SANABANI

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Endnotes:

- 1 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) 2011
- 2 The 2011 Early Grade Reading Assessment (RTI, 2012) results released in early 2012 revealed that an average of 27% of grade 3 learners in Yemen's schools could not read a single word.
- 3 In the second year of the trial, grade 2 and 3 teachers received additional training on using supplementary materials to support nonreaders in those grades. The training for scale-up to all teachers nationwide will be 10 days.
- 4 Community Livelihoods Project. (January 2014, p.26)
- 5 Data from the end line of the impact evaluation in 2013.
- 6 YEGRA's seven research-based steps are: Story review; Phoneme and letter sound awareness; Blending sounds into words; Common words to learn on sight; Read aloud/Listening/Vocabulary development; Independent reading; and Writing.
- 7 Twenty-seven percent of grade three students could not read a single word (Research Triangle Institute, 2012). Student performance in the Early Grade Assessment (EGRA) in Yemen (USAID: EDDATA II).
- 8 www.facebook.com/EGRyemen
- 9 www.youtube.com/user/YEGRAYe
- 10 Closing Ceremony Early Grade Reading Teacher Training in Sana'a and Ta'izz



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