

PROMOTING EMERGENT LITERACY

IN THE REVISED RWANDAN PRE-PRIMARY CURRICULUM

This position paper argues that:



- The pre-primary curriculum should give **detailed guidance on play-based emergent literacy and math activities.**
- The curriculum should recommend daily **interactive read-aloud sessions** and children's **free time with books.**
- The great majority of activities should **focus on developing a rich foundation in Kinyarwanda**, rather than English.
- The pre-primary curriculum should guide teachers on **how to create a print-rich environment in the classroom.**

Emergent literacy is one of the most important foundational abilities children must develop before beginning primary school. The process of becoming literate begins very young, and many early experiences can contribute to emergent literacy.¹ If children do not develop emergent literacy skills, however, the consequences can be costly both to individuals and to society. Low achievement in literacy correlates with low educational achievement, high rates of school dropout, poverty, and underemployment later in life.² This position paper focuses particularly on literacy, but much the same can be said about the importance of emergent math. Early reading, writing, and math skills develop concurrently and in an intertwined manner.³

Emergent literacy involves the development of at

least five basic competencies:

talking and listening, understanding print, knowing what books are, understanding about words and sounds, and knowing about the alphabet. To develop strong foundations for literacy, children need to understand and use language through listening, speaking, and acquiring new vocabulary. They need to develop a basic understanding of the functions of printed symbols—pictures, letters, words, and text—and how they relate to meaning. They need to know what books are, how to use them

(including holding and turning pages in the correct direction), and the purposes that they serve. They need to be able to discriminate between and manipulate the sounds of language, and understand that sounds are combined to make words. And, finally, they need to be able to identify the names and shapes of letters in the alphabet.



¹ F. Lancy, "The Conditions That Support Emerging Literacy," in *Children's Emergent Literacy: From Research to Practice*, ed. F. Lancy (London: Praeger, 1995).

² Snow CE, Ninio A. The contracts of literacy: what children learn from learning to read books. In: Teale WH, Sulzby E, eds. *Emergent literacy: writing and reading*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1986:116–38.

³ "Emergent Literacy: Investing Early for Exponential Outcomes," (Save the Children US, 2013).

Quality early childhood education (ECE) services help cultivate emergent literacy skills through play-based activities.

Rwanda has set its sights on expanding early childhood education as an integral part of its national development objectives. In order to capitalize on the planned expansions in pre-primary access, however, the revised pre-primary curriculum currently under development needs to give adequate attention to the cultivation of emergent literacy skills. This does not need to occur through traditional academic instruction and rote memorization—in fact, studies suggest that such methods may be detrimental during early childhood.⁴ Instead, the revised curriculum needs to provide teachers and caregivers with detailed guidance on how to carry out play-based emergent literacy activities for each age group. In this context, **Save the Children is pleased to offer for consideration a set of activities that have proven effective for cultivating emergent literacy in multiple country contexts**, including Rwanda.

Teachers need guidance in order to learn how to develop emergent literacy skills through play-based activities, rather than traditional academic instruction.

The pre-primary curriculum should designate a set minimum amount of time per day for interactive read-aloud and for children's free access to books.

In addition to play-based activities, **the pre-primary curriculum should advise teachers to engage in interactive read-aloud sessions each day, and should allow children free time to look at books themselves.** To make read-aloud interactive, teachers can pose engaging questions about the book's story and its pictures. As children enjoy listening and viewing quality literature, they develop a whole range of language skills in a meaningful context. Reading aloud practices are associated with learning print concepts⁵ and exposing children to the written language register, which differs from spoken language,⁶ as well as to story structures and literary conventions which are essential for understanding texts.⁷ Perhaps most importantly, reading aloud to young children and allowing them to look at books also promotes **a life-long love for reading.**

The revised primary curriculum needs to emphasize the learning of these emergent literacy skills in Kinyarwanda, not English. As Rwanda's own language of instruction policy concurs, there is significant research evidence indicating that children's learning is strengthened when their mother tongue is used in the early years.⁸ It is understandable that Rwandan parents would like their children to learn English from a young age. However, care should be taken not to jeopardize children's acquisition of emergent literacy by giving too much time to English instruction too early in a child's schooling experience. The use of English at the pre-primary level should be limited to no more than a few minutes spent each day learning a few basic words, phrases, or songs.

⁴ David Whitebread, "School Starting Age: The Evidence," (Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 2014); also see David Whitebread et al., "The Importance of Play: A Report on the Value of Children's Play with a Series of Policy Recommendations," (Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 2012).

⁵ Snow CE, Ninio A. The contracts of literacy: what children learn from learning to read books. In: Teale WH, Sulzby E, eds. Emergent literacy: writing and reading. Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1986:116–38.

⁶ Ezell HK, Justice LM. Shared storybook reading. Baltimore, MD: Brooks Publishing, 2005.

⁷ Cochran-Smith M. The making of a reader. Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1984.

⁸ Jessica Ball, "Enhancing Learning of Children from Diverse Backgrounds: Mother Tongue-Based Bilingual or Multilingual Education in the Early Years," (Paris: UNESCO, 2011).

In particular, the alphabet, pronunciation, vocabulary development, and pre-reading should be taught through Kinyarwanda, not English. Letter names and sounds are significantly different in the two languages. When children learn both alphabets from an early age, their ability to recognize and decode words can be delayed or impaired due to limited instruction time and quality. In addition to explicit learning of the alphabet, the use of Kinyarwanda should be emphasized for all conversations between teachers and students; for storytelling and teacher read-aloud sessions; and for exercises involving the interpretation of pictures and symbols. **In order to become literate later on, young children need to first develop a rich vocabulary and understanding of their mother tongue.** The emphasis on a Kinyarwanda-rich instructional environment will help ensure that children gain a solid foundation in the five emergent literacy skills cited earlier. Once children have developed a strong literacy foundation in Kinyarwanda, it will be much easier for them to transfer those skills towards learning English as a second language.

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Finally, the pre-primary curriculum should also guide teachers on how to create a print-rich environment in the classroom. Exposure to a variety of forms of printed text, symbols, and pictures combined with text, greatly helps children understand that text conveys meaning. This print awareness, in turn, helps reinforce alphabet knowledge, as well as cultivating curiosity and the desire to learn how to read. Because very few teachers studied in a print-rich environment themselves, they need explicit guidance on how to create one for the benefit of their own students.

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- Use **games & play-based activities** to develop the five emergent literacy skills
 - Specific pedagogical details need to be included in the curriculum: the activities developed for Save the Children's *Early Literacy and Maths Initiative* (ELMI) can serve as helpful examples.
- Promote **daily interactive read-aloud sessions** and **children's free use of books** by:
 - Guaranteeing the capitation grant for pre-primary classrooms to have access to children's books.
 - Specifying times for reading aloud and for children's free access to books in the timetable.
- Help teachers learn how to create a **print-rich classroom environment** by:
 - Including explicit guidance and photographs of model classrooms in the syllabus & teacher's guide.

LITERACY COMPETENCIES FOR THE RWANDAN PRE-PRIMARY CURRICULUM



Talking & Listening

- Speaks in complete sentences that are understandable to others
- Asks and answers questions; participates in discussions
- Follows multi-step instructions
- Understands, retells, and invents stories
- Recognizes unfamiliar words and uses a growing vocabulary



Understanding Print

- Can tell the difference between pictures and text
- Demonstrates awareness that print carries meaning
- Able to determine where a word ends and begins
- Experiments with writing tools and at least pretends to write
- Increasingly able to control writing tools, whether left or right-handed



Knowing what Books Are

- Holds books in the correct orientation; turns pages from left to right
- Knows where the text starts and ends on each page
- Uses pictures to aid in comprehension and to invent own stories
- Asks questions or makes comments related to the story being read
- Makes predictions based on titles and pictures



Understanding about Words and Sounds

- Discriminates sounds of *inyuguti* (letters) and *imigemo* (syllables)
- Identifies the beginning sounds of familiar words
- Identifies words with similar starting and ending sounds
- Shows a growing ability to discriminate separate syllables in words
- Plays with language: creates new words by substituting sounds



Knowing about the Alphabet

- Knows the names of the letters in Kinyarwanda
- Identifies the letters in own name or other familiar words
- Recognizes & distinguishes between uppercase and lowercase letters
- Able to copy the letters of own name in the correct sequence
- Increasingly able to write all of the letters of the alphabet

A note about emergent math competencies:

Learning to read, counting, sorting, and making patterns are all intertwined abilities that children develop concurrently. Just as with emergent literacy, emergent math skills can be developed through play-based activities in pre-primary school. The five foundational math competency areas are: numbers and counting, patterns, sorting and classification, comparison and measurement, and geometry.

