

PROMOTING EARLY LITERACY

IN THE REVISED PRIMARY KINYARWANDA CURRICULUM

A POLICY ADVOCACY POSITION PAPER

This position paper argues that:



- **Key reading skills that support literacy acquisition** should be incorporated into the Kinyarwanda curriculum.
- **Reading aloud** should be given explicit attention through the establishment of minimum times for reading activities.
- The Kinyarwanda curriculum should call for structured time for children to **self-select books and read independently**.
- Pupils should be exposed to a **wide range of texts, of different styles and genres**, across all subject areas.
- **Operational guidance should be provided** for early grade teachers to deliver high-quality reading instruction.

The ability to read is a prerequisite to the overall performance of children in all subject areas, hence the need to give optimum focus on reading in curriculum. The consequences of low achievement in reading are costly both to individuals and society. Low achievement in literacy correlates with low educational achievement, high rates of school dropout, poverty, and underemployment.¹ Policymakers and teachers alike are therefore charged with the important task of providing for **high-quality explicit reading instruction**.

Effective literacy instructional practices are best sustained over time if they are rooted in a commonly shared vision of effective literacy instruction, and articulated in a national curriculum. National reading standards, established and validated by REB in 2012, serve to guide the development of curriculum frameworks by offering a clear picture of reading tasks all learners should be able to accomplish at specific points along their learning continuum. It is therefore critical to draft a clearly defined reading curriculum that is aligned with these standards, but also outlines the competencies students must achieve and the instructional strategies to employ.

The reading process must be taught with the understanding that reading is applicable in all subject areas and should not be relegated to textbooks only. Rwanda's Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP) acknowledges the importance of schools in developing lifelong habits of reading. The ESSP also emphasizes that students must develop the foundational skills necessary to move from 'learning to read' to 'reading to learn' **across all subjects in the curriculum**.

¹ 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.

A vital component of an effective reading curriculum is the **reading aloud and sharing of books by the teacher**. ‘**Teacher read aloud**’ is a rich instructional practice that develops a whole range of language skills in a meaningful context, as children enjoy listening and viewing quality literature brought to life by the teacher. A great amount of research credits reading aloud for promoting the development of language and other emergent literacy skills.² Reading aloud practices are also associated with learning print concepts³ and exposing children to the written language register, which differs from spoken language,⁴ as well as to story structures and literacy conventions which are essential for understanding texts.⁵ Reading aloud to young children also promotes a love for reading, which is often regarded as paramount to specific literacy skills.

‘Teacher read aloud’ is a rich instructional practice in which a teacher brings a book to life for his or her students.



One of the strongest predictors of reading comprehension is the amount of time pupils spend reading independently.

Although reading aloud to pupils is helpful in developing their language skills, **the importance of pupils reading independently at increasingly more challenging levels also cannot be overemphasized**. One of the strongest predictors of reading comprehension and vocabulary development is the amount of time pupils spend reading independently.⁶ Provided that children have access to simple texts with attractive illustrations, this reading practice, done on a regular basis, can build children’s confidence in their reading abilities.

Comparisons from other country contexts can provide a useful reference point for the development of Rwanda’s own curriculum. The South African national curriculum offers useful guidelines **on minimal time allocation for reading instruction**.⁷ From pre-primary to primary 3, there is a statutory time allocation of a minimum of 4 hours and 30 minutes of reading instruction per week. The reading program is further unpacked with a specified 45 minutes per week dedicated for teachers to engage in read aloud activities. A complementary practice promoted by the South African Department of Education is that all schools arrange an additional half hour per day to ‘Drop All and Read’. This program has contributed to the development of a culture of reading in the classrooms and schools, as everyone—from learners to staff—is encouraged to engage in reading for enjoyment for a scheduled half an hour a day.

² Adams MJ. Beginning to read. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990; Se’n’échal M, LeFevre J. Parental involvement in the development of children’s reading skill: a five-year longitudinal study.

³ 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.

⁴ Ezell HK, Justice LM. Shared storybook reading. Baltimore, MD: Brooks Publishing, 2005.

⁵ Cochran-Smith M. The making of a reader. Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1984.

⁶ Teale WH, Sulzby E. Emergent literacy as a perspective for examining how young children become writers and readers. In: Teale WH, Sulzby E, eds. Emergent literacy: writing and reading. Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1986:vii–xxv.

⁷ National Reading Strategy, Department of Education Republic of South Africa, 2008.

Many countries have a statutory minimum of several hours of focused reading instruction per week, including exposure to a variety of types of books.

Similarly, Singapore's primary curriculum recommends using read aloud books and varying the genre of literature students read and view in order to build critical reading, writing and thinking skills. The curriculum advises that all primary school children be extensively exposed to various forms of narratives such as fables, fairy tales, legends, and realistic fiction at all year levels.

South Africa and Singapore's curricular guidelines have allowed teachers to appropriately support students' progressive acquisition of reading and writing skills by exposing them to various kinds of reading activities and genres of literature, including the use of rich supplementary expository texts in the content areas. In this way, **every teacher, regardless of the subject of instruction, is effectively a reading teacher.**



With the introduction of any new teaching methodologies, the curriculum should provide operational guidance to support teachers' understanding of the literacy competencies. A curriculum planning tool, such as a national literacy framework, supports all teachers to adopt the literacy practices highlighted in their teaching of the curriculum.⁸ It outlines the types of teaching processes teachers must employ as well as the types of learning activities students must experience at every grade level. It should also indicate the resources required to support those activities.

⁸ Welsh National Literacy and Numeracy Framework, 2013.



By providing explicit literacy competencies and rich instructional strategies, such as those proposed below, the revised primary curriculum will afford early primary students the opportunities to develop the skills and habits of life-long readers and writers.

STUDENT COMPETENCIES FOR THE KINYARWANDA PRIMARY CURRICULUM

- Actively views and comprehends texts read aloud by the teacher
- Engages in sustained independent reading for increased periods of time
- Uses phonics and word identification skills when reading
- Reads fluently with increasing pace, accuracy and expression
- Demonstrates knowledge of book elements & concepts of print
- Responds appropriately to text-related comprehension questions
- Summarizes the main idea and key details of a text
- Compares and contrasts themes in stories/ texts
- Uses writing to communicate ideas on a read text

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES FOR USE IN THE PRIMARY CLASSROOM

- Provide systematic instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics skills
- Use reading materials other than textbooks to teach literacy and language development
- Provide regular opportunities (weekly or more often) for students to:
 - view a text through teacher-led read aloud lessons
 - engage in independent reading of a wide range of leveled texts
 - write authentically about texts that they have read or viewed
- Provide explicit instruction in reading comprehension strategies
- Use stories/texts to contextualize grammar and structure content