

LITERACY LEADERSHIP BRIEF

¡Ya Basta! con EGRA

Humanizing International Support for Literacy Development

Recent studies of the literacy achievement of primary grade students in Africa are alarming. Well over half of the students assessed after three years of primary schooling could not read a single word! International donor communities must act now to address these horrific circumstances in consideration of the significant contribution of literacy to the development of strong economies and the sustainability of democratic institutions. There is insufficient local expertise to address these challenges. Fortunately, research conducted in the United States has demonstrated that through careful adherence to scientific methods, we can guarantee success easily and quickly for all students. We must make this expertise available now to ensure that these proven methods are implemented immediately and with fidelity.

As a literacy educator, how do you respond to this narrative? Are you nodding your head and ready to join in the effort? Or are you appalled at the falsehoods, the misrepresentations, and the arrogance in this message and wondering who and why someone would compose such a statement? The statement is fictional, but the core argument being forwarded is real and has been voiced and voiced again for more than a decade in documents that surround international aid to emerging economies in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Central America, and South America.

This approach has resulted in a massive flow of funding into the international aid industry that is focused on the “eradication of illiteracy.” The formula is simple:

- Use alarmist and deficit language to frame the problem in terms of something that is broken
- Dismiss local expertise and resources as ineffective and insufficient
- Generalize the existing conditions
- Promise a simple, one-size-fits-all solution that will work quickly to solve the problem
- Assert that external expertise is necessary to affect change
- Insist on large-scale impact evaluations. It really does not seem to matter that the claims made are not true.

The Case of EGRA

Consider the fact that USAID, the World Bank, and other funding organizations have spent millions of dollars on the intervention

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program labeled as EGRA (formerly Early Grade Reading Assessment and now Early Grade Reading Activity). A 2015 article from *International Journal of Educational Development* reported that the amount spent on EGRA up to 2014 was \$700 million. There is no doubt that as of 2018 this effort has reached more than \$1 billion. This approach, modeled after DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) in the United States and developed by the Research Triangle Institute (RTI), provides for scripted teaching with a focus on rapid, accurate reading of words and the reading of contrived, decodable texts. The RTI is one of the largest nongovernmental agencies that competes for grants and contracts in the international aid community.

The EGRA approach, which failed miserably as DIBELS in promoting progress under Reading First in the United States, is now not just the favored but also the only program receiving support for literacy work in developing countries by many funding agencies, including USAID.

EGRA is everywhere. Surely it must be the best the literacy research community can offer. Surely it reflects a consensus among literacy scholars. Right?

Wrong.

There is substantial evidence in the literacy research literature to call into question the core assumptions found in EGRA, such as the following:

- Reading failure is evidenced primarily by the inability to decode and to fluently decipher words.
- Literacy interventions alone can impact positive economic development in emerging economies.
- Research conducted in the United States is universally valid.
- Expertise in literacy is located outside of receiving countries.
- Criteria for success can be established meaningfully by outsiders.

The Path to Humanizing International Support for Literacy

The term *Ya Basta* (*Enough! Stop!*) has been used to capture the frustration of teachers who are being required (through political leveraging) to implement this narrow initiative in schools in their countries. Historically, the Spanish phrase *Ya Basta* arose as an expression of resistance against continued forms of racial and ethnic oppression both in the Latino community

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in the United States and across Latin America. This expression embodies the intentions behind this brief, although concerns reach far beyond Latin America into all corners of the world.

Yes, there is a problem, and the problem today is EGRA. The truth is that the international aid enterprise profits from these kinds of endeavors regardless of the content, the outcomes, or the collateral damage. We are proposing an alternative approach to economic assistance that humanizes the effort to work collaboratively as partners around literacy development. We have framed our vision for a future around some of the things the donor communities must stop doing and a new direction that we can take that will move us forward on a new path (see Moving Forward sidebar).

We are most passionate as a literacy research community around the last point in the sidebar: science—not as proof, but as discovery. Science is about building shared understandings and exploring uncertainty, not about proving one method as better than any other. The scientific method is a tool needed to understand and grow effective practices in diverse contexts.

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The International Commitment to Changing the Course

Many literacy experts around the world are largely unaware of what EGRA is and how it is being used in the developing world. The literacy profession has been largely silent on EGRA. Interpreting the silence of researchers as acquiescence or agreement would be wrong, but saying that the silence of the profession is leaving the most vulnerable populations in the world to deal with the whims of policymakers, bureaucrats, and businesses would be accurate.

We call on professionals to read deeply into the international aid literature to understand what is taking place in the name of science. Literacy professionals must speak out forcefully in whatever ways possible through professional associations and personal actions to resist EGRA and begin to reframe literacy support. This is not an issue of code vs. meaning or phonics vs. whole language methodologies. This is an issue of actions that undermine our profession as literacy educators and confuse our responsibilities as global citizens.

We name EGRA explicitly here because it is the current tool of choice. No doubt EGRA will be replaced in the future, but will

Is believing that international aid can be reenvisioned as based on principles of human rights and children’s rights to literacy...a pipe dream?

it be replaced by the same tool under a different name? Or will EGRA be replaced with an approach that is responsive to the “starts” we have articulated in the sidebar? Is it a pipe dream to prioritize the rich, imaginative uses of oral and written language as the nonnegotiable bedrock of early literacy teaching and learning rather than letter naming speed? Is believing that international aid can be reenvisioned as based on principles of human rights and children’s rights to literacy rather than continuing postcolonial oppressive practices a pipe dream?

We believe there is a better path. We can promise no certainty. There will be challenges and there will be ambiguity. In fact, the more we find comfort in this uncertainty, the more likely it is that we are on the right path toward humanizing our efforts.

The International Literacy Association’s initiative around Children’s Rights to Read (rightstoread.org) is a step in the right direction. This vision of what can be, however, cannot just sit alongside the kinds of oppressive practices found in EGRA. Rather, these new initiatives must critically examine what we are doing and vigorously challenge what contradicts our shared vision. The future demands activism from all of us as individuals and as collectives to help ensure a positive future with meaningful print engagements and appropriate literacy learning opportunities—not only for children of the global elites but for all children.

MOVING FORWARD

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| • STOP framing the literacy “problem” for others. | • START encouraging local colleagues to frame the literacy challenges they face and goals they envision. |
| • STOP implementing ideas from the Global North into other contexts. | • START engaging with indigenous ideas and drawing on local resources. |
| • STOP treating all countries, regions, languages, and cultures as if they are the same. | • START appreciating differences and engaging with each context as unique. |
| • STOP holding low expectations for children in countries receiving assistance. | • START assuming that all children are capable and can grow into powerful users of literacy. |
| • STOP simplifying reading. | • START appreciating literacy as complex and socially situated. |
| • STOP engaging with English as if it is the universal language. | • START valuing multilingualism as a rich resource. |
| • STOP importing or creating contrived texts. | • START valuing the storytelling traditions of countries and support the development of authentic children’s literature. |
| • STOP training teachers to deliver. | • START engaging with teachers as professionals who must make instructional decisions. |
| • STOP guaranteeing quick and unrealistic results that cannot be delivered. | • START working toward improvement and transformation as a journey. |
| • STOP imposing big solutions. | • START valuing local initiatives. |
| • STOP using crisis language to leverage resources. | • START engaging in thoughtful dialogue that respects and values all who are involved. |
| • STOP claiming science as proof. | • START practicing science as discovery. |

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International Literacy Association: Literacy Research Panel 2018–2019

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About the International Literacy Association

The International Literacy Association (ILA) is a global advocacy and membership organization dedicated to advancing literacy for all through its network of more than 300,000 literacy educators, researchers, and experts across 146 countries. With over 60 years of experience, ILA has set the standard for how literacy is defined, taught, and evaluated. ILA's *Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals 2017* provides an evidence-based benchmark for the development and evaluation of literacy professional preparation programs. ILA collaborates with partners across the world to develop, gather, and disseminate high-quality resources, best practices, and cutting-edge research to empower educators, inspire students, and inform policymakers. ILA publishes *The Reading Teacher*, *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, and *Reading Research Quarterly*, which are peer reviewed and edited by leaders in the field. For more information, visit literacyworldwide.org.



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