

BOOKED FOR LEARNING

A month-long classroom “Read-A-Thon” program improved children’s reading habits and skills in the Philippines.

Featuring an evaluation by Ama Baafra Abeberese, Todd J. Kumler, and Leigh Linden



PHOTO: CLARISSA DELGADO | J-PAL/IPA

“read-a-thon” program sponsored by an NGO in the Philippines. Can an intensive, short-term reading program improve children’s reading habits and reading skills?

Like many developing countries, the Philippines has made considerable progress toward the Millennium Development Goal of universal access to primary school: In 2008, the country achieved a 92 percent primary school enrollment rate. However, the challenge for education policy does not end with increasing enrollment and filling classrooms. Helping schools find cost-effective ways to improve student learning is also vitally important in light of the resource constraints that many school systems face.

Literacy is an especially critical skill, given the importance of reading for learning in every subject, for future employment, and for children’s ability to navigate successfully through life. Simply providing more resources without changing the learning environment has not proven effective in improving most children’s reading skills, so more innovative approaches are required.

A randomized evaluation by Ama Baafra Abeberese (Columbia University), Todd J. Kumler (Columbia University), and J-PAL affiliate Leigh Linden (University of Texas at Austin) investigated the impact of a one-month

KEY RESULTS:

The read-a-thon immediately increased reading activity and improved reading test scores. At the end of the program, children in the read-a-thon schools reported reading an additional 7.2 books at school in the past month and scored 0.13 standard deviations higher than children in the comparison group on tests of reading proficiency.

Children in the read-a-thon schools read more books at home. Despite the fact that the children could rarely take books home from school, the read-a-thon participants reported reading an average of 1.2 more books at home during the month of the program.

Children continued to read more books after the program ended. Three months after the read-a-thon ended, children in program schools were still much more likely to be reading than children in the comparison group. However, the impact had faded: children in program schools read 3.1 more books in the past month at school, and scored 0.06 standard deviations higher on reading tests.

EVALUATION



PHOTO: TODD KUMLER | J-PAL/IPA

The read-a-thon is a core program of Sa Aklat Sisikat (SAS), a nongovernmental organization based in Metro Manila with the stated goal of building a nation of readers. (SAS’s name is roughly translated as “Books Make You Cool.”) The evaluation took place in Tarlac province, which SAS had never previously reached with the program. From a sample of 100 public schools, representing a broad range of academic performance levels, researchers randomly assigned 50 to participate in the read-a-thon and 50 to a comparison group. The program had two main components, each designed to appropriately target children’s abilities:

INTERVENTION

Books: Each school in the read-a-thon program received a set of 60 storybooks for every fourth grade class. The books were in both of the Philippines’ official languages, Filipino and English, and were selected for age-appropriateness, literary value, and potential appeal to students.

Training: SAS reading specialists trained the teachers to conduct a read-a-thon, which was designed to encourage children to read as many of the 60 books as possible. For 31 days after the training, the students and teachers used the books in hour-long daily activities including storytelling, literary games, and individual silent reading. Students kept track of the books they read using a SAS-supplied wall chart and wrote their thoughts about the stories in notebooks.

The read-a-thon took place between September and November of 2009. Immediately after the program, researchers tested the students’ reading skills through an independently proctored and graded exam. Surveyors also asked students about the number of books they read in the previous week and month, excluding textbooks. To check that students who claimed to have read a book had actually done so, students were asked to name the title and describe the plot of the last book they read. A second round of surveys, in February 2010, assessed whether the program had any persistent impact after SAS stopped interacting with the program schools.



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RESULTS

The read-a-thon had a dramatic impact on reading activity.

The program increased the proportion of students who reported reading a book in school in the past week by 19 percentage points, from a base of 68 percent. The students in the read-a-thon schools reported reading an average of 2.3 more books in school in the past week, and 7.2 more books in the past month, than the comparison group (Figure 1A).

Children in the program also read more books at home.

Teachers valued the SAS books highly and generally did not allow students to take them home, so for children to read at home they would have had to access books independently of the program. The program still had an effect on reading at home, though it was smaller than the effect on reading in school. Children in the read-a-thon schools reported reading an average of 1.2 more books at home in the last month (Figure 1A).

The program had a smaller impact on reading three months after it ended.

Three months after the read-a-thon, children in program schools were still much more likely to be reading books at school than those in comparison schools (73 percent versus 51 percent, respectively). The children in program schools also continued to read more books in school and at home, but this effect was smaller than the short-term effect (Figure 1B); for example, children in the treatment schools reported reading 3.1 additional books in school in the previous month.

The program raised reading test scores immediately, but the effect faded over time.

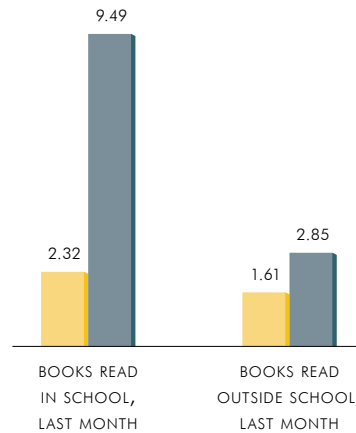
The program increased children's scores on tests of reading comprehension and oral reading proficiency by 0.13 standard deviations, which is in the range of many other effective programs targeting native language skills. As with reading habits, there was a smaller longer-run effect: Test scores were 0.06 standard deviations higher in the program group at the second follow-up survey. The researchers estimate that the program cost \$US8.52 per tenth of a standard deviation gain per child.

There was little evidence of improvements in other subjects or of systematic differences in impact among different types of students.

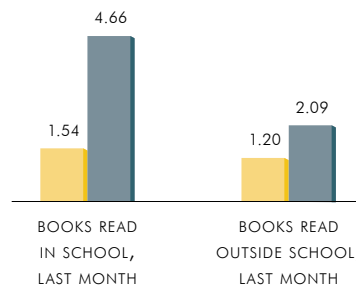
Test scores in nonreading subjects could have been affected positively, through more proficient reading of textbooks and other materials; or negatively, by reducing class time for other subjects. In fact, there were no significant differences between program and comparison schools on math or social studies scores. The program did not appear to have different effects for different types of students (by age, gender, language spoken at home, or baseline reading score).

FIGURE 1. IMMEDIATE AND LONGER-TERM INCREASES IN READING

A. END OF PROGRAM



B. THREE MONTHS AFTER PROGRAM



■ Comparison ■ Read-a-Than

Note: All differences are statistically significant at the 99% level.

POLICY LESSONS



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A targeted, short-term reading intervention can increase student motivation and capabilities. However, there was evidence of some fading of impact over time, and it is possible that at some point the impact will disappear completely. This suggests that intensive programs can make a difference, but may need reinforcement over the long term.

The program's success highlights the importance of teaching at the appropriate level for students. The SAS program carefully chose books and activities that were age-appropriate and would interest the students. The organization also trained the teachers to conduct engaging activities and gave them the flexibility to implement the read-a-thon in their chosen language of instruction (Filipino or English). This intervention is an example of how providing appropriate inputs and changing instructional methods together can improve student achievement.

MEETING CHILDREN WHERE THEY ARE

Schools in developing countries often have large classes and few resources, so hiring more teachers and spending more on inputs such as textbooks appear to be sensible ways to improve school quality. However, according to a review of randomized evaluations in education by J-PAL affiliate Michael Kremer and Alaka Holla (2009), there is little evidence that smaller class sizes or increased inputs, unaccompanied by changes in pedagogy, improve student learning.

Interventions that target instruction to children's ability levels, on the other hand, have proven effective in several contexts. Examples of successful interventions include remedial education programs to help children who have fallen behind, computer-based curricula that allow children to move at their own pace, and grouping students into different classes based on their initial learning level. Ensuring that instruction is matched to children's needs should be a high priority in improving education in developing countries.

Featured Evaluation: Abeberese, Ama Baafr, Todd J. Kumler, and Leigh L. Linden. 2011. "Improving Reading Skills by Encouraging Children to Read: A Randomized Evaluation of the Sa Aklat Sisikat Reading Program in the Philippines." Working Paper: Columbia University.

For Further Reading: Kremer, Michael and Alaka Holla. 2009. "Improving Education in the Developing World: What Have We Learned from Randomized Evaluations?" *Vol. 1 of Annual Review of Economics*, edited by Kenneth J. Arrow and Timothy F. Bresnahan, 513-542. Palo Alto, California: Annual Reviews.

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