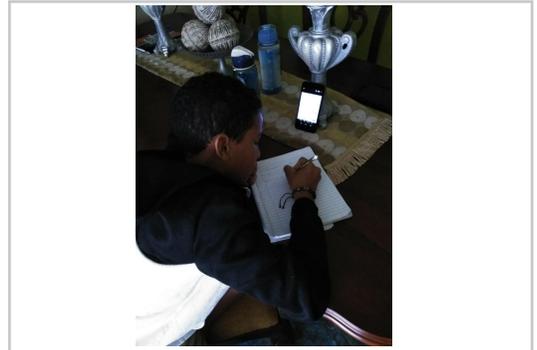


Case Title:

Adapting Primary School Literacy Instruction During COVID-19 in the Dominican Republic

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Organization: USAID/Dominican Republic



Children studying remotely during distance learning modality. Credit: Bianca Lajara, Coordinadora de Comunicaciones, Proyecto USAID Leer

Summary:

The March 2020 onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Dominican Republic prompted the Ministry of Education (MoE) to order an immediate closure of schools nationwide. For eight months, all public schools remained closed as the MoE struggled to develop a distance learning program that would reach the most students. The MoE’s program included printing booklets for home use, broadcasting class lessons on television and radio, providing students and teachers with digital devices, and implementing online training courses for school personnel.

In response, the USAID-supported Read activity, which aims to improve children’s reading and writing skills in 387 Dominican public elementary schools, had to adjust to this new, challenging context. Using an adaptive management approach, Read worked remotely with teachers and school personnel for almost eight months until in-person classes resumed. Moreover, Read had to identify how to best support the government’s efforts to mitigate potential learning losses likely to occur with a non-interactive modality, prompting the activity to follow a continuous learning and improvement approach.

Read shifted its paradigm so that its work was not just about literacy, but also about saving lives, mitigating wealth inequality, closing the digital divide, and creating safe spaces for communities. In collaboration with a coalition of stakeholders, Read adapted its proven curriculum and best practices and disseminated them widely. Read also continued collecting data; it now owns the only public data that exists on educational achievement of students in the Dominican Republic during the pandemic.

Which two subcomponents of the **Collaborating, Learning & Adapting (CLA) Framework** are most reflected in your case? Please reference them in your submission.



- Internal Collaboration
- External Collaboration
- Technical Evidence Base
- Theories of Change
- Scenario Planning
- M&E for Learning
- Pause & Reflect
- Adaptive Management
- Openness
- Relationships & Networks
- Continuous Learning & Improvement
- Knowledge Management
- Institutional Memory
- Decision-Making
- Mission Resources
- CLA in Implementing Mechanisms

1. WHAT: What is the general context in which the case takes place? What organizational or development challenge(s) prompted you to collaborate, learn, and/or adapt?

The USAID Read activity (henceforth Read), implemented by the Universidad Iberoamericana (UNIBE), works in 387 public elementary schools to improve the reading and writing skills of Dominican children. Read works in a challenging context, where decades of underinvestment in the education system has produced the worst educational outcomes in Latin American and the Caribbean, with the exception of Haiti. During the first four years of implementation, Read partnered with local municipal officials and parent-teacher associations to achieve extraordinary results: every year, students increased their reading comprehension by 10 percentile points. These results were possible in part because Read developed the country's first decodable books, used by every student to achieve literacy fluency. These books won the 2020 Library of Congress Literacy Honoree award for innovation in literacy instruction. Hundreds of thousands of these books were printed and ready to be distributed to schools nationwide when the pandemic hit.

In March 2020, due to COVID-19, the Ministry of Education (MoE) closed all public schools and offered no instruction for eight months. For the 2020-2021 academic year, classes were only offered through nationwide television and radio broadcast. Schools finally opened for in-person instruction in November 2021. Two years of school disruption had a detrimental effect on student achievement and mental health. School closures exacerbated existing wealth inequality, since private school students were able to pivot quickly to online learning while public school students faced frequent disruptions. Further, children from vulnerable communities were less likely to have a parent at home to help them access available technology, perpetuating the cycle of intergenerational wealth inequality.

2. WHY: Why did you decide to use a CLA approach? Why was CLA considered helpful for addressing your organizational or development challenge(s)?

Recognizing that its activity alone could not address the challenges COVID-19 posed to its schools, Read employed a continuous learning and adaptive management approach, seeking partnerships with its stakeholders to create and maintain a sustainable ecosystem. For example, Read collaborated with the MoE to broadcast classes that used age-appropriate materials Read developed. By supporting the broadcasts, Read could ensure children nationwide learned of its materials and used them to improve their reading skills.

As part of the continuous learning process, Read realized that although there was a scarcity of digital devices within vulnerable populations, most families and teachers could count on at least one internet-capable cell phone to download materials and allow children to practice independent reading at home. Read quickly transferred their physical books to digital formats so that beneficiaries could easily access and use them. Read also created an accessible and free digital library; facilitated virtual weekly storytelling sessions; and established virtual mentoring sessions for teachers and school counselors.

By recognizing that many uncertainties existed during the pandemic and providing opportunities for staff to adjust direction to improve progress, Read's approach helped staff maintain flexibility in their decision making. Read identified new ways to communicate and continue conducting teacher mentoring sessions, hold pedagogical group sessions, provide feedback to teachers, and work with students, while also mentoring school counselors on supporting families affected by COVID-related trauma. Read recognized that openness would be a key aspect of communication and management, since there was little official guidance in place for educators.

3. How: Tell us the story of how you used a collaborating, learning and/or adapting approach to address the organizational or development challenge described in Question 2.

With the closure of all public schools, Read found itself in limbo, since it had no access to its main beneficiaries – teachers and students. Since it was unclear how long schools would remain closed, Read wondered how much to adapt its work, curriculum, and programs within the changing nature of the local context. In addition, the MoE, which had not paid much attention to Read’s decodable books prior to the pandemic, became very interested in them when the nationwide broadcasts were developed.

To address the uncertainty that existed, take advantage of the MoE’s interest, and build relationships to collaborate on achieving its goals, Read made a concerted effort to lead a collaborative, transparent process of information flow between all stakeholders to ensure that Read was best placed to address the immediate development challenges facing students. Drawing on the use of scenario planning as a core tool for adaptive management, Read was able to consider the different ways the future of education could unfold, and how Read could respond effectively and dynamically in a way that built resilience and facilitated positive outcomes.

To facilitate Read’s adaptive management approach, USAID agreed to amend its award to allow the activity flexibility to innovate in real time. For example, USAID approved Read’s digitization of its decodable books and creation of a digital library, and allowed Read to use funds to pay for web-based data collection tools and equipment. After receiving approval from USAID to adapt its work, Read began converting the hundreds of thousands of books that had been printed, but not distributed due to the pandemic, into PDF format to share directly with students and parents via Whatsapp, the platform of choice.

However, since children could not access the PDFs unless the owner of the electronic device (typically the parent) was present, Read began planning for the creation of a digital library so that children could download books onto their school-provided laptops to read at home. In a five-month period, Read converted all teaching materials to digital formats accessible through a digital repository. In search of a suitable host for the digital book’s repository, Read staff reached out to several organizations, including UNIBE’s library. UNIBE agreed to host and finance, through cost-sharing, a free public and child-friendly digital library platform.

Read leadership also restructured its human resources and assigned new roles to staff who had to pivot to working virtually. Yet there was hesitancy and distrust by staff in such a fluid and stressful environment: Read staff, like everyone in the world, faced new realities working from home while caring for family. In response, Read leadership showed compassion by intentionally helping staff navigate the changing environment and the demands of virtual work. For example, staff who previously visited schools for classroom observation and to coach teachers were now provided with tools and guidance on how to train teachers on the use of virtual platforms. Psychologists who prior to COVID-19 taught counseling techniques on gender inclusion were now supported in expanding their work to include mental health and trauma counseling for students and families who lost a family member during the pandemic.

Finally, to address a longstanding issue in the education sector of insufficient public data on education outcomes, Read prioritized virtual collection of performance indicator data. Read invested in internet packages for randomly selected students to further their reading comprehension scores. The students and their parents were trained on how to collect their own data and how to submit data. Through this partnership and innovation, Read became the only institution in the country that collected real-time data on student performance during the pandemic.

4. ORGANIZATIONAL IMPACT: How has collaborating, learning and adapting affected your team and/or organization? If it's too early to tell, what effects do you expect to see in the future?

After working in an environment plagued with uncertainty and hardship, Read staff are emotionally and psychologically scarred. Ongoing pandemic-related lockdowns brought with them isolation, anxiety, and disruption of personal routines, affecting people's mental health and Read's workplace culture.

Having a collaborative approach towards common goals and the reassurance of openness to apply innovative approaches eased these obstacles and became a best practice that currently guides Read's work today. For example, the organization discovered that adapting to remote work through increasingly sophisticated and accessible digital tools was an effective response to the distance learning environment, and during the crisis Read provided cell phones, remote internet access, and other virtual resources to its staff, resources which continue to be provided to date because of the benefits associated with them. Read management led the team to be creative and resilient in coexisting with the realities of living during the COVID-19 crisis. They adapted workplace practices to include flexible schedules and new approaches to motivate and recognize staff, approaches which continue to be used to date.

The positive changes the organization made to support their staff and their program implementation during the crisis has convinced Read's staff to adopt CLA as an intrinsic value. Staff continue to embrace the best practices learned, such as a flexible work environment that is compassionate to the needs of individuals, and the use of virtual methodologies to sustain mentoring, teach literacy, and monitor performance. In addition, the relationships built through collaboration with the MoE and key stakeholders during the crisis created bonds of trust and appreciation, and this has been the impetus for multiple discussions on the sustainability of Read's work after the program ends in December 2022. These discussions would not have been possible without the collaborative and adaptive management approach Read embraced during the pandemic.

5. DEVELOPMENT IMPACT: How has using a CLA approach contributed to your development outcomes? What evidence can you provide? If it's too early to tell, what effects do you expect to see in the future?

Thanks to its CLA approach, Read efforts allowed students access to an education during school closures, and provided a holistic approach to service delivery that went beyond literacy outcomes to include the mental health and well-being of beneficiaries.

One of the most remarkable outcomes was the creation of the virtual library, a sustainable and accessible resource that will remain available for years to come. As of May 2022, the teaching and learning materials had 39,522 views, and other resources developed had 81,231 views.

To ensure that needed professional development continued, READ adapted selected content from in-person training sessions into five voluntary webinars for MoE officials, teachers, and the public. The resulting Virtual Professional Development Conference was joined by more than 44,000 participants.

While FY2021 measures of reading comprehension in Read schools were about 30% lower than before the pandemic, Read believes that the application of CLA principles helped mitigate learning gaps that would have otherwise been exacerbated during COVID-19. To support this assertion with evidence, Read is currently analyzing how their supplemental resources ensured that these losses were not greater.

In terms of supporting Read beneficiaries' mental health and well-being, the holistic approach that Read used in the 387 target schools to teach literacy while caring for the whole child and teacher has been highlighted as a best practice, and shared with the MoE as a necessary approach to address the needs of beneficiaries during crisis. Collecting data during the pandemic and school closures is a significant achievement, since Read's statistics serve as the only evidence base in the country indicating how Dominican children's reading skills were impacted during that period. Read has shared this data with the MoE and other stakeholders currently studying the impact of COVID-19 on learning outcomes.

6. ENABLING CONDITIONS: How have enabling conditions - resources (time/money/staff), organizational culture, or business/work processes - influenced your results? How would you advise others to navigate any challenges you may have faced?

A combination of several enabling factors allowed Read to adapt and shift its resources to meet the greatest needs during the pandemic:

-First, Read was a well-established program producing impressive learning outcomes before COVID-19; therefore its reputation ensured that other organizations trusted working with the Read team.

-Second, UNIBE is a local, well-respected university with highly qualified staff that understands the local context, and thus it was able to convene the right stakeholders to address challenges.

-Third, because of Read's interest in helping the MoE prepare and disseminate better, more engaging courses through their national broadcasts, Read gained visibility and support from other Ministries to replicate Read's work in other parts of the country.

-Fourth, Read learned that it was possible to collect data and do many other operations virtually, reducing overhead expenses and freeing up resources that could be used to support more innovative and cost-saving approaches to doing business.

-Finally, Read understood its leverage points when working with the MoE, because it had something of great value that the MoE did not: data. Owning the only dataset on Dominican student achievement during the pandemic helped Read connect with the MoE to explain why Read's work is important and impactful, and convince the MoE that efforts should be sustained after Read ends.

Read's advice for others navigating similar challenges is the importance of using scenario planning as a core tool for adaptive management. Through scenario planning, organizations can respond dynamically to an unknown future. Scenario planning assisted Read with thinking in advance about the many ways the future might unfold and how the Read could be responsive, resilient, and effective as the future became reality. Going through a similar exercise may help other teams feel mentally prepared and ready to tackle the challenges that arise.