

TECHNICAL BRIEF



Unlocking the Power of “Super Levers”: Teacher Behavior Change to Sustain Instructional Reform in Liberia

SERIES: UNDERSTANDING TEACHER BEHAVIOR CHANGE FOR FOUNDATIONAL LEARNING

December 2023 | Edward Landreth, Camila Fernandez, Patience Suah, Josh Zoia, Jennifer Swift-Morgan

Key Takeaways

Three “super levers” are needed to make instructional reforms “stick” so that teachers in Liberia adopt new practices as their own. As part of our series on understanding how to achieve lasting teacher behavior change for the consistent use of new approaches that promote foundational learning, this study of instructional reform for early literacy in Liberia suggests that teachers need 1) improved professional development and coaching that builds their vision, abilities, and muscle memory to deliver new approaches; 2) the opportunity to implement these new approaches through an enabling environment; and 3) multiple sources of motivation to change their practices and adopt new ones.

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Background

While Liberia has made important efforts to improve foundational learning in its public schools, two decades of continuous donor-supported programming with new teaching and learning materials and countless rounds of teacher professional development have not yet resulted in Liberian teachers consistently applying evidence-based practices in the classroom. The endline evaluation of USAID's most recent education program in the country, Read Liberia (2017-2022), revealed very limited teacher uptake of key program tenets, showing low levels of instructional quality and pedagogy that did not reflect the Read Liberia training or materials (NORC, 2021).

Study Objective and Methodology

Given the history of foundational literacy reform efforts in Liberia and the challenges encountered in engendering sustained uptake of new instructional approaches, the country presents a useful case to study the obstacles and facilitators affecting whether teachers adopt and continue the practices for which they have been trained. In early 2023, Chemonics spearheaded a collaboration between Liberian and international education experts, researchers, and behavioral scientists to design and conduct a targeted study of teacher uptake of new instructional practices for foundational literacy in order to answer one overarching question: what does it take to maintain new teaching practices at large scale over time?

Understanding that teacher behavior change results from a complex combination of factors, the research team applied the Actor-Based Change (ABC) Framework (see box) to design a qualitative study to better understand drivers of teacher behavior, including social and political economy factors, within the education ecosystem in Liberia. Building upon the COM-B framework (Michie et al., 2011) of *capability*, *opportunity*, and *motivation* to change *behavior*, the ABC-informed study design was built on the premise that pivotal actors within the ecosystem will need specific elements of all three COM components to adopt and sustain the behaviors needed to improve education outcomes and maintain these gains at scale.

ABC Framework

The Actor-Based Change (ABC) framework (Koleros, 2018) combines systems thinking, complexity science, and behavior change theory to address a specific problem. It posits that all contexts have a system comprising individual actors (people and institutions) who influence each other — and never behave in isolation. Individuals thus need others to help create an enabling environment and incentives, not just capacity, to adopt desired behaviors and achieve the changes needed to solve the problem and sustain results.

Building on prior knowledge of Liberian teachers and their ecosystem as well as the literature on teacher change in similar contexts, the research team developed hypotheses for both current obstacles and likely assets and solutions to address each aspect of the behavior change framework. In May 2023, the team examined these hypotheses in a small sample of schools and education offices that had participated in Read Liberia in Montserrado, Margibi, Bong, and Nimba counties, examining cases of both success and struggle. The team interviewed 15 district education officers and vice principals of instruction, conducted focus group discussions with 28 teachers, and conducted structured observation of 13 classrooms teaching reading. Following initial data analysis, the study team conducted a participatory, actor-based workshop in Monrovia with teachers and both non-governmental and ministry education leaders to further analyze findings and identify critical factors that represent both existing assets to harness and obstacles to overcome.



Study researcher Patience Suah interacts with students ahead of a classroom observation.

Research Questions and Findings

Informed by the literature and ABC Framework, the Liberia study team examined three research questions to better understand critical factors that can lead teachers to adopt and sustain behaviors needed to improve learning outcomes, organized around the elements of capability, motivation, and opportunity. These are presented below together with the topline findings.

Question 1

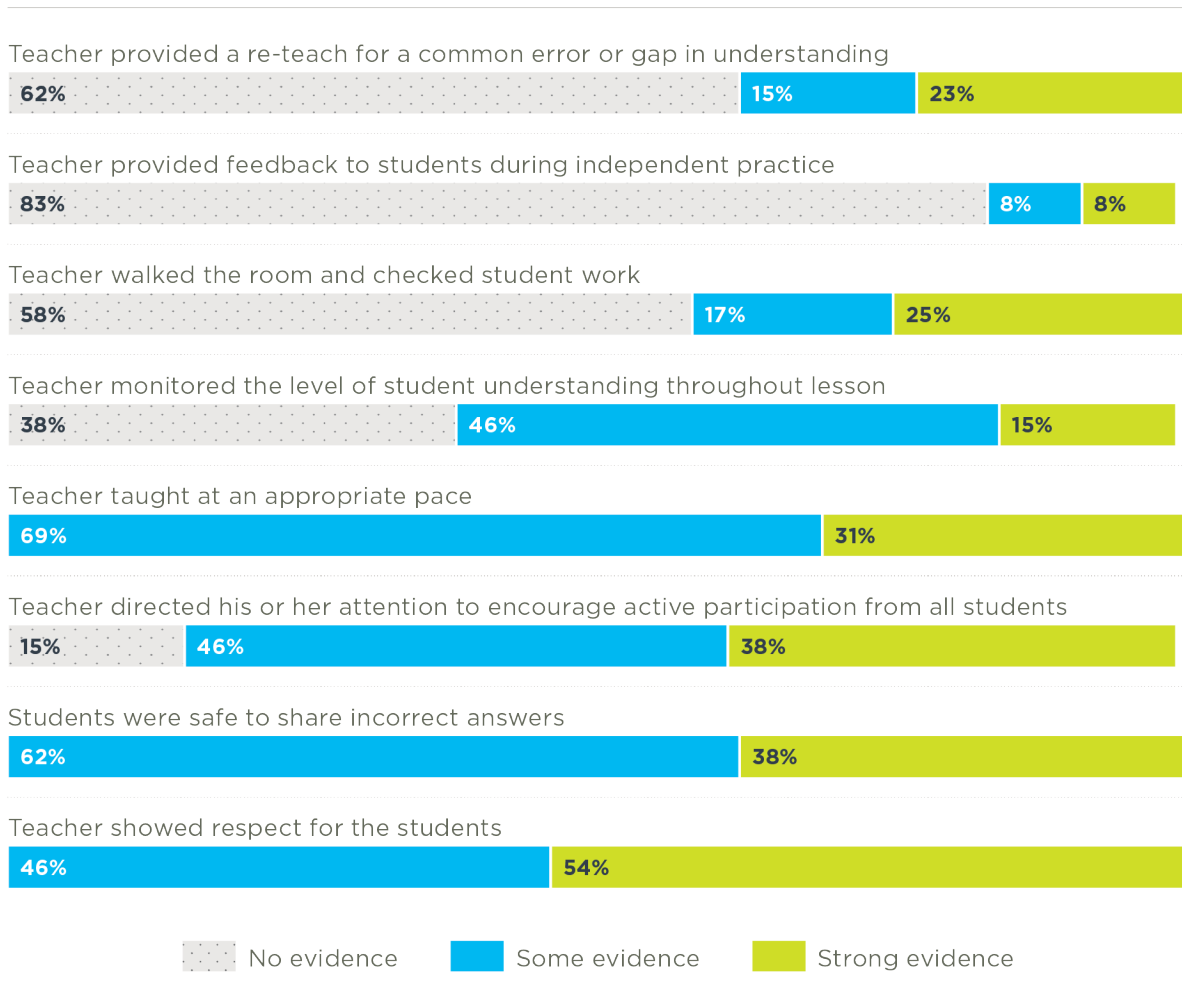
What teachers' capabilities (i.e., knowledge and skills) allow them to consistently apply evidence-based and age-appropriate teaching practices, and what might help them increase these capabilities? Which capability gaps prevent them from learning and applying these practices, and what might help them increase these capabilities?

- **Teachers promoted inclusion and displayed respect for students.** Eighty-five percent of teachers encouraged active participation from diverse types of students at least some of the time. In all classrooms, students felt safe to share incorrect responses. These tendencies suggest an important capability of teachers to create a culture in which other new practices might also be adopted.
- **Teachers showed limited evidence of demonstrating effective practices in monitoring and feedback.** Only 42% of teachers walked around the room and checked on students working, and only 16% provided feedback to students during independent practice. Thirty-eight percent of teachers provided a re-teach when a common error or gap in understanding of students emerged.
- **Pre-service training, including for the C Certificate required to teach primary school, did not form the necessary base skill set for teachers to teach reading.** For example, teachers do not learn pronunciation- and phonics-based blending as part of their core training, and they revert to strategies such as ineffective choral responses and rote recitation that were not part of direct instruction introducing or practicing new skills.
- **The dosage of in-service training and coaching was insufficient and/or inconsistent.** Teachers advocated for frequent, shorter teacher training sessions over infrequent, longer ones, and wanted increased continuous professional development and opportunities to practice skills before classroom application.

Classroom observations showed teachers' strengths to build upon and capability gaps to be addressed (see Figure 1 on the next page)

- **In-service training and coaching is appreciated but minimally effective.** Teachers most commonly requested more training in pedagogy for effective instruction, rather than just understanding how to use the teaching and learning materials provided by the program.
- **Coaches are not consistently trained, supported, and deployed.** Some teachers reported very limited coaching, often impacted by the distance coaches much travel. After donor programs ended, coaching decreased significantly, despite efforts to encourage ministry uptake and support of school-based instructional leaders.

Figure 1. Selected Results from Classroom Observations

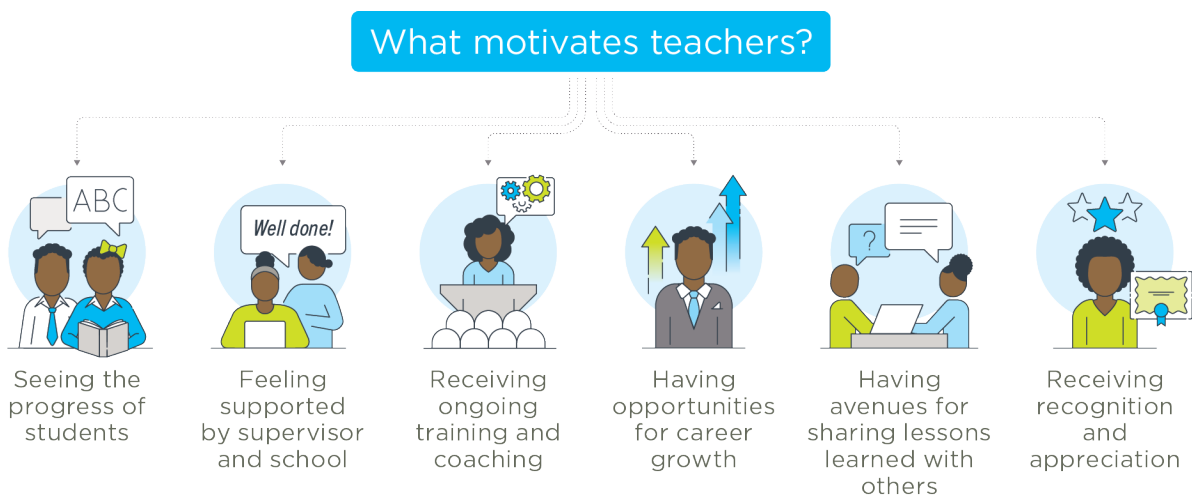


Question 2

What aspects of teachers' beliefs and motivation encourage or prevent them from learning and consistently applying evidence-based and age-appropriate teaching practices, and how might motivation to do so be increased?

- **Although low salaries and delayed payment are a constant burden, Liberian teachers' passion for their job outweighs this challenge.** Teachers are inspired to help children grow into young adults with the skills they need to succeed. They also care about supporting their community and see education as critical for the future of Liberia.
- **Teachers do not usually receive recognition for gaining new skills or supporting student outcomes.** Teachers rarely receive certificates for completing training, and when they do it is not linked to promotion or salary increases.
- **Teachers cited numerous existing and potential sources of motivation.** These included seeing the progress of their students, feeling supported by their supervisor and school, receiving ongoing training and coaching for their own continuous learning, opportunities for career growth, having avenues for sharing lessons learned with others, and recognition and appreciation (see Figure 2).
- **Strong school leadership and culture, which promotes accountability combined with trust, also encourages adoption of new practices and improved teaching.** Positive outlier schools exhibit a strong, trusting bond between teachers and leadership. This relationship supports innovative teaching approaches, fostering a culture of risk-taking and sustained implementation of new practices.

Figure 2. Teachers' Sources of Motivation

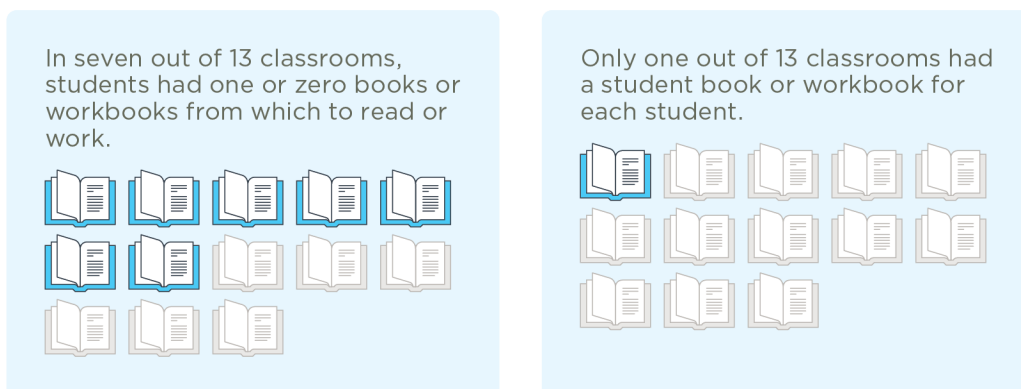


Question 3

What aspects of the school environment and education system support or prevent teachers from consistently applying evidence-based and age-appropriate teaching practices, and how might the environment and system be improved to better help them do so?

- **Challenging classrooms environments (e.g., overcrowding, overaged learners, multiple learner levels, multiple initiatives) make it difficult to implement the new practices.** Teachers in Liberian classrooms find themselves trying to put out countless fires whose origins are out of their control. Ministry of Education initiatives are trying to address many of these challenges both at their source and at the school and district level, but teachers still struggle to find the time to concentrate on reading instruction.
- **Teachers and students were missing core teaching and learning materials, severely hampering the opportunity to apply instructional approaches that depend on these materials.** In classroom observations, some teachers had guides while most students lacked materials for reading and writing practice (see Figure 3). This limited activities to listening comprehension for many classes and most learners.
- **The location of a school impacts the resources and support it receives.** Remote rural schools have fewer personnel and teaching and learning materials, and fewer visits from district education officers, resulting in minimal coaching and supervision.
- **Some schools have school- or district-level meetings weekly or monthly where teachers can share challenges, best practices, and lessons learned and provide peer coaching.** These schools had a stronger culture of learning and greater ongoing support. Teachers in these schools were motivated to apply new teaching strategies.

Figure 3. Few Learning Materials for Students in Classrooms



Recommendations

The initial study findings and actor-based analysis workshop reveal three pivotal "super levers" to improve the sustained adoption of effective teaching practices in Liberia, with likely applications to other similar contexts.

- **Super Lever 1: Improve teacher capability through localized continuous professional development (CPD) with examples, ample practice, and targeted feedback.** While awaiting teacher pre-service reforms and new teachers that benefit from them — and for ongoing upskilling — CPD is an important component of any instructional reform. But *how* this CPD is conducted — the specific content and adult learning techniques, as well as the delivery modalities — can make all the difference. CPD focuses on bite-sized, high-value/high leverage instructional techniques (see, for instance, [Lemov, 2023](#); [McCray et al, 2017](#)) and routines that build “muscle memory” combined with providing teachers and coaches with examples to see and analyze effective teaching using these techniques; these approaches can amplify the impact on teacher capability ([Bambrick-Santoyo, 2019](#)). Using these approaches on the [USAID/Tajikistan Read with Me program](#), for instance, Chemonics measurably improved teacher instruction and [Universal Design for Learning](#) practices, leading to student reading gains of eight correct words per minute in Grades 2 and 4.
- **Super Lever 2: Improve teacher motivation through progress-driven inspiration, support, and recognition to motivate and sustain teaching excellence.** There are several ways to leverage the multiple sources of motivation teachers reported. Addressing the common challenge ministries face in providing regular coaching visits to schools, the system can use other approaches — through training, simple materials, and support to school leaders — to foster a culture of learning and mutual support in each school built around principles of respect, safe experimentation, continuous feedback and encouragement, and a collective focus on the ultimate goal of increased student learning. Formative assessment of different kinds can measure this learning to guide better instruction (see, for instance, Chemonics and One World Network of Schools

Enabling instructional leaders to use visuals of exemplary teaching focused on bite-sized techniques when and where teachers need them, with plenty of time to practice and improve with feedback, can help teachers master simple and effective routines to reach all students in the classroom and increase their skills.

collaboration around [academic monitoring in Malawi](#), and this Science of Teaching [synthesis around assessment-informed instruction](#).) Additionally, the Liberian Ministry of Education can further leverage newly appointed psychosocial counselors to work not just with students but also teachers, school administrators, and community leaders to

To inspire a culture of learning at all levels, teachers and school leaders can use data-driven instruction and measure student progress through ongoing, low-stakes assessment that shows teachers the effect they are having and lets them know what to focus on to do better.

promote personal care and teacher wellbeing (e.g., exercise, sleep, nutrition, stress management), positive school-community culture (e.g., mutual respect, trust, collaboration, open dialogue, positive discipline), resilience, and adaptation, thus promoting a whole school-community approach to social and emotional wellbeing, informed by the latest learning from the [USAID-funded Contextually Relevant Emotional and Social Wellbeing Tools Study](#). To grow a critical mass of effective teachers and promote positive spillover effects, the ministry, together with teachers unions and other partners, can expand school- and district-level meetings and expand their reach through professional teacher networks for sharing lessons learned and best

practices, using cost-effective tools such as WhatsApp groups, which education leaders can also use to send motivational messages. To improve accreditation motivators, teacher training institutes and the Center of Excellence for Accreditation and Teachers Licensing could allow selected donor-funded training activities to count toward certification, and consider modest bonuses (if not changes in grade) for specializations in literacy and/or instructional coaching. Non-monetary incentives can also be expanded, including certificates for all training completed as well as awards and public ceremonies to recognize top performing teachers and other school-community leaders.

- **Super Lever 3: Improve teacher opportunity to implement new practices through an enabling environment that allows them to apply new skills.** Capability and motivation alone is not enough. Liberian teachers and their coaches need a more supportive enabling environment, including a dependable supply in sufficient quantities of user-friendly and structured teaching materials fully aligned with evidence-based student textbooks for every lesson and review session, more time to practice new teaching and coaching techniques and routines, and support to manage other challenges in the classrooms and schools that compete for their attention and limit the opportunities to apply and practice new instructional approaches. In addition to an [improved teaching and learning material supply chain](#) and strategies for managing factors like overaged classrooms, other potential solutions include adjusting school

timetables to increase time for reading instruction, and introducing [multi-purpose reading camps](#) — as Chemonics has done on the USAID/Tajikistan Read With Me and USAID/Rwanda Soma Umenye programs — or other remedial sessions that provide teachers with more chances to apply their new skills and coaches with the opportunity to practice coaching teachers with feedback, all while supporting the students who need the most attention.

Some of these levers are tailored specifically to the unique Liberian context. Others, however, would likely serve other countries grappling with similar challenges of teacher uptake and maintaining instructional reform at scale. Given the growing recognition that behavior science and systems approaches are critical to effectively analyze and address complex challenges such as these, the ABC Framework can help assess and inform behavior change at both the individual and systemic levels in any context. In this case, the Liberian Ministry of Education and other education leaders are now looking to translate the identified super-levers into action to increase and sustain critical foundational learning gains across the country.

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ABOUT

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About this series: This series explores the successes and opportunities for enduring teacher uptake of instructional practices for foundational learning across contexts. Our goal is to add to the evidence base of promising and potential approaches to effectively support teachers and enable the continued implementation of highly effective instruction. In doing so, we seek to enhance educational reform efforts to improve outcomes for all learners.

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For questions about this technical brief, contact edupracticeteam@chemonics.com.