



INFORMATION BRIEF

CONDUCTING EARLY GRADE READING ASSESSMENT IN CONFLICT AFFECTED AREAS

Societies wracked by protracted crises, which includes regular bombing of homes and schools, rarely provide an insight into the performance of children in those schools. Under the leadership of the Foreign and Commonwealth Development Office (FCDO), the Manahel programme has kept schools in NW Syria open and functioning and benefited almost 575,000 children through school, home and after school education and responded to their psychosocial and protection needs.

Despite the challenges, since 2019 early grade reading assessments (EGRA) have taken place in NW Syria due to the programme's focus on improving and assessing learning. These assessments show that, as the immediate threat of war receded, children have shown remarkable resilience evidenced by their rapid improvement in reading scores.

This Information Brief presents reflections on undertaking EGRA in a protracted crisis over several years. It is based on the experiences and insights of officers in Manahel and seeks to provide a better understanding of these issues to assist in planning effective education interventions in similar situations of crisis. The Information Brief concludes that, in conflict affected areas such as NW Syria, implementing an independently validated teacher-led, rather than externally led, approach to assessment each term is more effective in a number of ways including managing issues of access and in engaging the entire teacher and student population in assessment and addressing learning improvements such that students can perform at their best.

Findings from implementing EGRA

This section draws on insights and learning from the Manahel programme, which has implemented EGRA in NW Syria since 2019.

Many students require special educational support. Although immediate exposure to war has receded in the last few years, many students are still traumatised and some have war-related disabilities requiring special educational interventions, with strong components of safeguarding and psychosocial support.

Students and teachers are difficult to track. High levels of student and teacher mobility are common as families move around having lost their homes. Tracking student movements is complicated and often impossible. In addition to mobility, high levels of student and teacher absenteeism are common, making annual assessments challenging.

Many teachers exist on community contributions. Manahel’s support to the education system has included providing stipends to 16,000 teachers of grades 1 to 4, as well capacity building for Education Directorates (ED). However, the salary system for paying teachers in schools not supported by Manahel or various NGOs no longer exists so most teachers exist on what communities can provide.

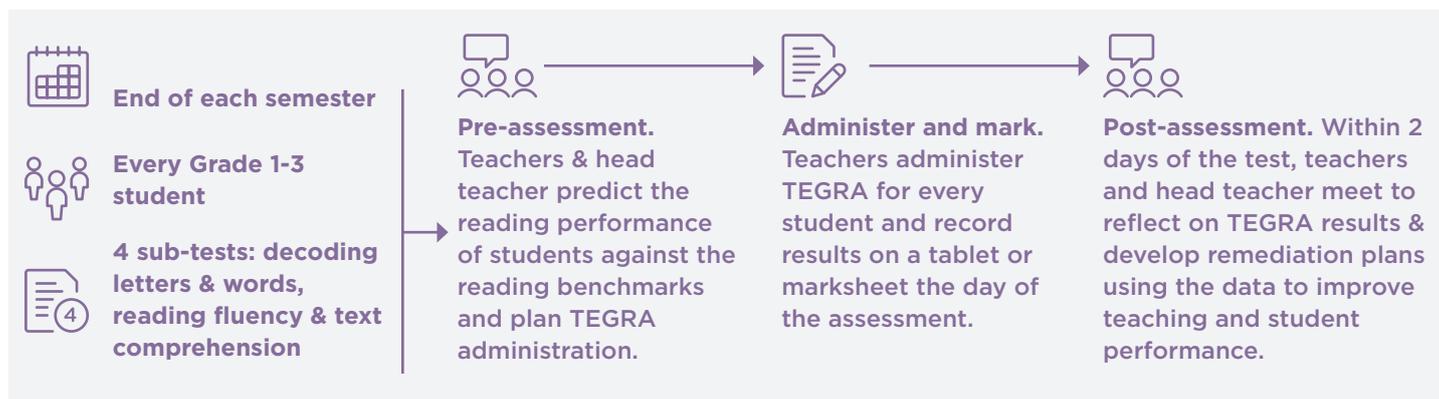
External annual assessments face many challenges. Enumerators cannot be trained face-to-face as the trainers cannot access NW Syria and the enumerators cannot leave. Conducting training and EGRA oversight virtually poses specific challenges:

- Training is conducted in a cascade with lead trainers trained virtually by the agency conducting EGRA. They in turn train the enumerators either in person or virtually.
- Doing inter-rater reliability tests to assess the enumerators’ accuracy is complicated.
- Monitoring the implementation of EGRA must all be done virtually, making solving of specific problems difficult.
- Enumerators are male due the environment. Teachers of early grades are female. A stranger who is male testing students one-on-one is likely to lead to anxiety and underperformance – particularly among girls.
- External people can be viewed with suspicion. This makes it impossible to take the normal approach of using a national group of professional enumerators to undertake the EGRA.

Recommendations

Given the specific challenges related to conducting EGRA in NW Syria, a key recommendation from Manahel, which may apply to other conflict affected areas, is to equip teachers to conduct EGRA assessment with their own students on a regular basis.

This teacher-led early grade reading assessment (or TEGRA), combined with continuous assessment which teachers conduct weekly, should be part of a cycle of activities. It should inform identification of students who are struggling, and the design of appropriate remediation activities. Rather than once a year in a sample of schools, TEGRA would be undertaken by all teachers at the end of every term.



The advantages of introducing TEGRA include:

- It would not rely on a cadre of male enumerators
- It would be a whole population survey, not a sample of students
- It would provide teachers with student performance data to inform their remediation
- It would provide some resilience as a model in a protracted crisis given accessibility issues for externally driven assessments.

Whilst this model does not address the challenges testing in Arabic poses, although being a less intimidating way of collecting data, it would assist in making the tests in formal Arabic as benign as possible.