

**Building the Nigeria Center for Reading Research and Development:
A collaboration between the Learning Systems Institute at Florida State University and
Bayero University Kano**

Over the past decade, the Learning Systems Institute (LSI) has built a strong reputation internationally for its faculty's work in the development of early grades reading in low- and middle-income countries. In 2017, LSI received a \$1 million grant from the United States Agency for International Development to support a collaboration with Bayero University Kano (BUK), a university in northern Nigeria. The goal of the project was to develop and establish the Nigerian Center for Reading Research and Development at Bayero University Kano. FSU and BUK established a Collaborative Agreement to achieve the following objectives:

- Familiarize BUK faculty with the current science of early grade reading and train them to deliver pre-service courses in the teaching of primary grades reading teacher training colleges in Bauchi and Sokoto states,
- Engage six key BUK faculty in a series of one-semester scholarly residencies at FSU to familiarize them with the latest research in primary grades reading; to introduce them to the design, organization and objectives of a reading research center; and to study different models of academic program development, curricular content, and program design in reading,
- Engage key FSU faculty in advising BUK on the design and scope of the NCRRD,
- Support the infrastructural development of NCRRD, including computers and software,
- Engage key BUK and FSU faculty in collaborative research on primary grades reading in the Nigerian context,
- Assist BUK in the development of a one-year postgraduate diploma in the teaching of primary grades reading, and
- Assist BUK in the development of a master's degree program in the teaching of primary grade reading.

This capacity development project aimed to establish the Nigeria Centre for Reading Research and Development (NCRRD), as a collaboration between FSU and BUK. This aim was achieved—the NCRRD is now fully established and operating as a producer of research, a partner on education development projects, and a convener for stakeholders nationwide on early grade reading. With strong institutional support from BUK and ongoing partnerships with FSU and other organizations, the NCRRD is sustainable and well positioned to bring in external funding.

Capacity development activities under this grant took place at three levels—individual faculty development, center development, and broader outreach and policy engagement., as discussed below. The NCRRD has proved to be a highly collaborative organization, working with USAID, the British Council, DFID, UNICEF, and a number of nongovernmental organizations operating in Nigeria. In sum, these activities have built the NCRRD's reputation as a center of excellence in early grade reading.

This grant resulted in relevant, rigorous, and timely research that will inform early grade reading instruction in Nigeria, as an outcome of the faculty capacity development activities. The topics included content analysis of reading materials used in classrooms, teacher understanding of methods of teaching reading comprehension, and teacher approaches to reading instruction in large classes. FSU and BUK faculty collaborated on a book, titled *Issues in the Teaching of Early Grade Reading in Nigeria* (2020), which was co-edited by Dr. Ismaila Tsiga at BUK, Dr. Adrienne Barnes at FSU, and myself.

I will briefly discuss the project activities completed at three levels: activities with individual NCRRD faculty, activities aimed at developing the NCRRD, and activities aimed at impacting stakeholders and policies beyond BUK.

Individual faculty fellow development

Individual-level capacity development began in October 2017, when FSU faculty traveled to BUK to deliver a graduate level course on early grade reading to the faculty fellows. The course was delivered in several multi-day sessions, ending in December 2017. During this course, FSU faculty supported NCRRD faculty in writing research papers related to their areas of interest, which were later developed into an edited book, as discussed further below. This course provided the faculty fellows who would later attend FSU for extended residencies a foundation in the current evidence base on early grade reading.

During the project period, six faculty fellows of the NCRRD came to FSU for six-month residencies. During the residencies, fellows completed coursework in three areas: early grade reading, research methods, and international and multicultural education. Each fellow audited four or five courses. In addition to coursework, fellows visited local primary schools to observe reading instruction and meet with school administrators. All fellows attended one national- or international-level conference outside of Florida. In some cases, fellows presented their work at these conferences. Attendance at these conferences allowed the fellows to build their professional networks and exposed them to current research in the field of early grade reading.

During their residencies, each fellow was matched with an FSU professor as a research mentor. Mentors helped fellows to develop a research question, design studies, and develop data collection tools. Upon their returns to Kano, fellows collected data, analyzed it, and wrote a journal article for publication in partnership with their mentors. These publications and presentations established the credibility and expertise of the NCRRD fellows in the field of early grade reading, both within Nigeria and internationally.

NCRRD Development

LSI directly contributed to the establishment of the NCRRD in many ways. FSU purchased books and other print materials for the NCRRD library; these books were unavailable in Nigeria and will be an invaluable reference for researchers and graduate students in the region. In addition, FSU provided—and continues to provide—the NCRRD with free access to thousands of journal titles through its subscriptions to journal databases. This will allow NCRRD faculty to stay up to date on developments in early grade reading globally and to conduct new research. The materials

available in the library were further bolstered by the textbooks, articles, and other materials brought back to BUK by the fellows after completing their residencies.

The grant supported a study visit to FSU by three senior fellows of the NCRRD, including the Director and the two Associate Directors, and BUK Vice-Chancellor Muhammad Yahuza Bello. This was an opportunity for the BUK group to meet with senior administrators at FSU, consult with faculty at the Florida Center for Reading Research regarding priorities for curriculum and teacher training in Nigeria, and examine the instructional technology used at FSU. This visit also provided an opportunity for discussions with a broad group of FSU administrators, faculty, and students on the role universities can play in conflict-affected areas of the world.

An important aim of the project was to establish the center's reputation as a producer and disseminator of research. One means of doing this was through the two national conferences that were held in August 2019 and March 2020. Conference attendees from across Nigeria attended, including representatives of State Universal Education Boards, universities, teacher colleges, community-based and international nongovernmental organizations, and donor agencies. The high attendance at these two conferences demonstrates the interest in early grade reading in Nigeria, as well as the capacity of the NCRRD to act as a convener in this field. The conferences provided networking opportunities and helped build stakeholder relationships. The NCRRD's reputation has also been developed through publications and presentations. Dissemination of research in international-level journals is a critical element of being perceived as a center of excellence.

Wider-scope activities

The NCRRD has already influenced early grade reading in Nigeria in several ways. The Director of the NCRRD has contributed to the development of the National Reading Framework for Nigeria, through participation in the Technical Working Group. NCRRD faculty have consulted and collaborated with various programs and program implementers working in Nigeria, including USAID's Northern Education Initiative Plus, RANA, Jolly Phonics, the British Council, UNICEF, and RTI International. Their local knowledge and expertise in early grades reading will help ongoing and new education projects to be both rigorously designed and contextually appropriate.

The NCRRD has also engaged in national-level curriculum development work and the development of new academic programs, in line with the project's objectives shown above. The NCRRD designed and proposed to the national Universities Commission the incorporation of reading components into the curricula of language-learning-based programs at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels in all Nigerian universities. This material was developed with consultation from Dr. Laura Steacy of the Florida Center for Reading Research and draws on content in the State of Florida's reading endorsement courses, as taught at FSU. Additionally, the NCRRD has designed two new programs at BUK focusing on early grades reading.