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# Bridging & Accelerating K-3 Learning in the Philippines

The evaluation showed that the ABC+ program accelerated learning recovery in kindergarten through the third grade. The set of mutually reinforcing interventions that made this possible included: improved skills training for teachers, an efficient process that locally produced and distributed over 11 million supplementary reading materials, increased parental involvement in supporting children's reading, and the use of a rapid testing system that enabled teachers to target reading strategies to match the needs of individual learners.

## Introduction

To improve early-grade literacy development, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the Department of Education (DepEd) of the Philippines, and the Research Triangle Institute International (RTI) co-developed the Advancing Basic Education in the Philippines project or ABC+. This five-year USAID-funded project supports innovative research-based approaches to enhance instruction and learning outcomes in kindergarten to grade 3 (K–3). The project supports improved early-grade literacy, a better transition of reading ability to Filipino and English, a more solid acquisition of foundational math concepts and skills, and improved social and emotional learning.<sup>1</sup>



ABC+ strives to improve outcomes in early grades through work in three result areas. Intermediate result (IR) 1 helps improve early grade instruction and delivery systems, with a focus on research-based teacher professional development. IR 2 increases access to quality, leveled supplementary reading materials in mother tongues. Finally, IR 3 supports the enabling environment within which the two other IRs operate by improving the education system's capacity and commitment to manage and implement interventions supporting effective early-grade instruction.<sup>2</sup>

To gauge the extent to which ABC+ achieves its objectives, USAID/Philippines commissioned a third-party evaluation examining the project's relevance, effectiveness, and sustainability.<sup>3</sup> Some of the significant findings of the evaluation are:

**ABC+ activities are relevant and highly aligned with DepEd policies and programs.** They were instrumental in implementing learning continuity and learning recovery programs, especially literacy instruction, which received the most significant level of ABC+ support.

<sup>1</sup> RTI International (2019). ABC+: Advancing Basic Education in the Philippines Monitoring and Evaluation Plan. Unpublished.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> The topline evaluation questions were: (1) To what extent does the innovation introduced by ABC+ correspond with the objectives of the DepEd?; (2) To what extent has ABC+ contributed to improving early-grade literacy, the better transition of reading ability to Filipino and English, more solid acquisition of foundational math concepts and skills, and improved social and emotional learning for children in the early grades?; (3) To what extent did ABC+ achieve its outputs and outcomes in the three IRs supporting effective early-grade instruction?; and (4) Will the achievements persist after the project's conclusion?

**2** The ABC+ program helped young learners catch up on learning that was delayed due to COVID-19-related school closures (learning recovery). Its successful activities included professional development for teachers, school heads, and supervisors; production and access of quality supplementary reading materials (SRMs) that can be publicly shared; and technical assistance on the learning recovery plan. The ABC+ efforts on the DepEd system's capacity to strengthen the use of data from the comprehensive literacy assessment (CRLA) are very helpful in monitoring children's reading outcomes and in helping teachers provide the right level of individualized support to young readers.

**3** The achievements in improved early-grade reading and social and emotional skills for children in early grades will likely continue after the ABC+ project conclusion because of the following approaches: a) training by the National Educators' Academy of the Philippines (NEAP) and commitment of teacher trainers to adapt ABC+ instructional strategies continuously, b) license attribution of the SRMs are under Creative Commons, which enables instructional materials to be reproduced without concern for copyright law; c) use of CRLA in communicating and monitoring, and d) Parent-Teacher Community Association (PTCA) involvement.

### **BOX 1** ABC+ MID-TERM PERFORMANCE EVALUATION FOCUS AND METHODOLOGY

The evaluation used a theory-based, mixed-methods design to assess ABC+'s performance. The quantitative method used an online survey, and qualitative methods included literature reviews, KIIs, FGDs, outcome harvesting (OH) workshops, and the most significant change technique (MSCT). Both OH and MSCT were used to describe other outcomes brought by COVID-19 as the context that emerged during the first year of the program. A validation workshop and survey was also conducted to ensure the accuracy of the evaluation information. The evaluation focused on the performance of ABC+ from 2019 to 2022.

The evaluation design has three levels of analysis:

- Individuals supported by ABC+, such as teachers, school heads, faculty, and students.
- Institutions focusing on system capacity, including the DepEd Central Office, Regional and Division levels, and schools; and
- Community organizations and private sector affiliates involved in ABC+ implementation.

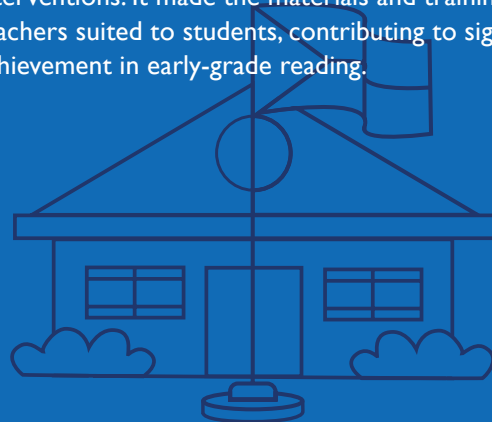
The evaluation focused on school divisions supported by ABC+ in Regions V (Bicol), VI (Western Visayas), and a small portion of Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) (Maguindanao Division in BARMM).

## Evidence of Improved Early-Grade Literacy Resulting from ABC+ Interventions

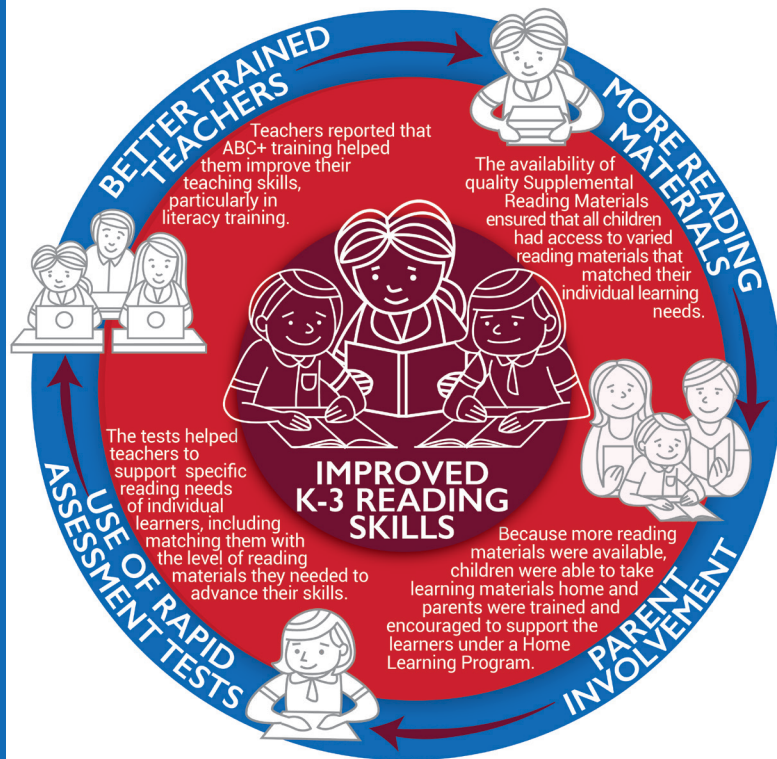
The ABC+ project provided a complete and streamlined package of activities spanning teacher training, materials development, and system capacitation that was highly relevant to DepEd policies and programs, particularly on learning continuity and learning recovery. While other programs typically target only one goal, ABC+ recognized the value of the relationship among training, materials, and the overall system and worked on all three simultaneously.

The evaluation found that ABC+ has made significant achievements among the three result areas. But in terms of magnitude, its most important accomplishment, and thus relevance, is in literacy development, as suggested by the following evidence:

- 1** Six out of ten teachers believed that the ABC+ program has been very useful in improving early grade reading instruction and delivery. Recipient schools in the regions reported that ABC+ training helped them with literacy instruction to a great extent because of a more scientific way of teaching reading.
- 2** Non-readers in Filipino and English languages decreased, particularly in Region VI project areas. Non-Filipino readers dropped from 34.3 percent to 11 percent, and non-English readers dropped from 14.8 percent to 6.6 percent. Profiling of learners through CRLA was instrumental in applying data-driven interventions. It made the materials and training for teachers suited to students, contributing to significant achievement in early-grade reading.



- 3 The learning recovery plan (LRP) contributed to the improved learning outcomes of K-3 learners. Specifically, the rate at which K-3 learners could catch up in their reading abilities was accelerated in the ABC+ and host regions. From an eight-week plan, learners in Albay were already catching up on their reading delays by the fifth week of the program.
- 4 Learners benefited the most (KII respondents = 55, 100%) because of their access to supplementary reading materials. Results show that gains in improved reading skills correspond to ABC+ interventions.
- 5 ABC+ approach to producing reading materials was highly efficient and cost-effective and resulted in the production of 11,634,849 SRMs. These reading materials were distributed to 750,479 learners.



## BOX 2 LEARNING RECOVERY PLAN FOR K-3

ABC+ was relevant in supporting DepEd's learning continuity and learning recovery programs. As schools grappled with remote learning and the new demands of education, ABC+ supported schools' learning continuity programs by providing SRMs to support reading practice. ABC+ teacher training also provided teachers with strategies they applied in preparing the modules for learners. ABC+ ensured that instructional materials were distributed on time with the help of stakeholders. Teacher training and materials development continued during the pandemic through online platforms and virtual communication.

Although the ABC+ activity's objectives and design did not change with the onset of COVID-19, the pandemic significantly altered the context within which it was implemented. In March 2020, schools closed due to COVID-19, disrupting ABC+'s implementation, which started four weeks earlier. Most activities became remote, including teacher training. In December 2021, selected DepEd schools piloted face-to-face (F2F) classes. Beginning in January 2022, DepEd progressively expanded F2F classes in 6,000 schools as part of its learning recovery plan. ABC+ partnered with DepEd Region V to contribute to this effort in preparing the Recovering for Academic Achievement by Improving Instruction through Sustainable Evidence-Based Learning Programs (RAISE). This plan contributed to improved instruction and access to quality materials. Regional focal persons, supervisors, school heads, teachers, and MTB-MLE coordinators collaborated on an eight-week recovery plan to ensure that K-3 students could catch up and recover their learning losses in reading skills. This catch-up strategy was supported technically by ABC+

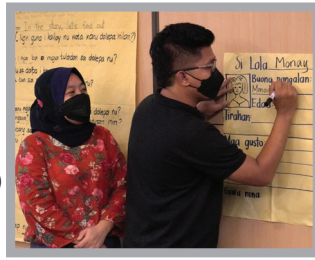
## ABC+ Package of Effective Interventions for Early-Grade Literacy

Contributing to the above evidence is a package of complementary interventions implemented by ABC+ on teachers' training, SRMs, CRLA, and participation of parents and LGUs.<sup>4</sup> The significant findings for each intervention are outlined as follows:

### Teachers' Training

- 1 ABC+ teacher training reflected pandemic pivots that adjusted to the varying circumstances of teachers. ABC+ utilized an adaptive training schedule that accounted for teachers' busier schedules and other pandemic-related concerns. Training activities were made more flexible because they could be completed online or offline.

**2** ABC+ teacher training was reported by teachers to have helped them to a great extent, particularly in literacy instruction and integration of socio-emotional learning (SEL) and gender equality and social inclusion (GESI).



**3** Strategies from ABC+ teacher training helped learners catch up on their reading delays earlier than the expected recovery duration.

**4** The development of mother tongue-based-multilingual education (MTB-MLE)-based instructional materials was added as a criterion for K–3 teachers’ competency for professional promotion. This is considered a welcome recognition of their efforts and an additional motivation to keep producing leveled local SRMs.

**5** There is an observed increased capacity in curriculum development of K-3 teachers.

**6** Teachers diligently adopted ABC+’s teaching strategies and teaching processes, including integrating GESI and SEL.

**7** The pre-service training preparation (given by the identified teacher education institutions in their respective region) continuously contextualized the development of teaching and learning materials.

## Supplementary Materials

**1** ABC+’s locally developed age- and developmentally appropriate reading materials for the K-3 levels help learners read in their mother tongue and Filipino language. SRMs, which are leveled readers in the local language, help children practice their reading skills and develop an interest in reading.

**2** ABC+ training helped teachers become story and materials writers and materials quality assurers/evaluators through skills development training. This contributed to the additional production of SRMs.



**3** ABC+’s SRMs contributed to literacy because they are in the local language, which parents could understand and explain to their children.

**4** Evaluation results indicate that learners’ have increased their love for reading.

**5** Creative Commons, as the license attribution, where program recipients may distribute copyrighted SRMs freely, was helpful to many teachers and parents. Teachers could easily access and reproduce the SRMs. Likewise, parents recognized the value of these learning materials.

## Comprehensive Literacy Assessment

**1** ABC+’s CRLA tools were used to create data dashboards that enabled the teachers to quickly identify eligible learners to undergo designed remedial intervention strategies based on their learning needs.

**2** Region V has begun incorporating CRLA results as one of the key performance indicators in its quarterly monitoring and evaluation sessions.

**3** Schools’ use of CRLA allowed teachers to design learning continuity and recovery programs informed by assessment data.

**4** Schools continued bridging the learning gaps by maximizing CRLA results in formulating plans and activities, even after the 8-week DepEd Regions V and VI curriculum.

**5** School teachers were trained to utilize their dashboard to conduct systematic assessments using CRLA, which served as their basis for data-driven interventions.



## Partnership with parents and local government units (LGUs)

**1** ABC+ initiated collaboration with parents by capacitating home learning partners (HLPs) for remote learning and using SRMs that targeted literacy development.



**2** ABC+ provided robust support systems (e.g., human and use of technology resources) for parents and teachers, especially during the pandemic.

**3** One barangay in Region V set up a community learning hub. Others established reading centers, which benefited the learners and illiterate community members.

**4** ABC+ partnered with the Department of the Interior and Local Government Academy (DILG-LGA) to develop

a model for Early Grade Literacy education governance to capacitate local communities.

**5** Region V provincial government expressed support for ABC+'s program by strengthening the local education sectoral mechanism (ESM), a model for sub-sector planning introduced by ABC+. ESM was designed to enhance the existing policies and practices relating to decentralized planning and financing for early-grade education by LGUs and DepEd regions and division offices.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> ABC+ introduced a structured, standardized process and tools/rubrics for determining the gaps along the three areas of access, quality, and governance and facilitated the prioritization of programs, projects, and activities (PPAs). Some of these priority PPAs were considered in the LGUs' Executive-Legislative Agenda and School Education Fund, thus contributing to improving learning outcomes and strengthening the link between DepEd and LGUs.

## Key Recommendations to Sustain or Scale-up Effective ABC+ Interventions

The evaluation provides the following recommendations to both DepEd and ABC+ to sustain or scale up effective ABC+ interventions:

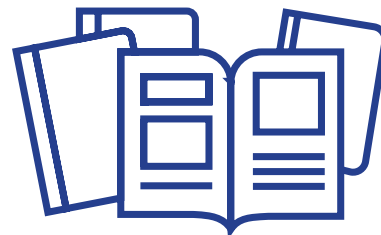
### TEACHERS' TRAINING



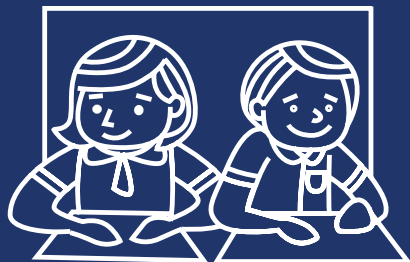
- 1** The National Educators Academy of the Philippine (NEAP) continues exploring a training design and schedule to support and cater to teachers' needs, situations, and well-being.
- 2** Continued application and monitoring of ABC+ practices in teaching training. DepEd-Regional and Division Offices could provide financial and technical assistance for teachers to continue applying what they learned from the teacher training. This, in turn, will serve as a refresher approach, as most of the training was conducted during the height of the pandemic.
- 3** Assist schools in disseminating best practices, especially in implementing recovery programs concentrating on literacy development.

- 1** Setting up a platform to store the digital version of SRMs for broader access and allot office space for storing printed SRMs.
- 2** Collaborating with LGUs to address challenges in keeping quality SRMs. School heads and teachers could seek help and request a library room or building to store all the SRMs safely.
- 3** Private sector and LGUs could help transport SRMs for remote storage.
- 4** Application of some ABC+ practices in materials development.

### SUPPLEMENTARY READING MATERIALS



## COMPREHENSIVE LITERACY ASSESSMENT



- 1 Adapt enhanced institutionalized policies on using CRLA as an assessment and educational sector management tool at the national level.
- 2 Technical training on data dashboards (for regional, division, and school levels).
- 3 Training on how information from the dashboard can be used to improve instructions using data-driven interventions.

- 1 Partnership with the DILG – LGA to strengthen and sustain barangay learning hubs and barangay reading centers through MOA/MOU.
- 2 Creation of policy on how schools may collaborate with the PTCA to mobilize volunteer parents, youth organizations, and NGOs to support the HLP Program.
- 3 Strengthen and sustain HLP Program.
- 4 Creation of contextualized training program to train parents and community members/volunteers from barangays who will serve as trainer-of-trainers to promote and use Parents and Community Session Guides.
- 5 Creating a memorandum based on DepEd policy to allow teachers to train parents and community volunteers to establish and sustain learning hubs and reading/learning centers.



## PARTNERSHIP WITH PARENTS AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT UNITS

## Promising ABC+'s Support for Improved Numeracy

It should be noted that ABC+ also implemented activities that support improvement in early-grade instructional practices for math. Although literacy has been ABC+'s primary focus, numeracy development is also becoming an additional target since it has been identified as a skill for which children likewise need help. In 2021, ABC+'s efforts to improve numeracy began with research in collaboration with the University of the Philippines National Institute for Science and Mathematics Education Development (UP-NISMED).

Based on the research results, math instruction pivots were designed, piloted, and evaluated. In 2022, ABC+ conducted teacher training on numeracy in Regions V and VI. Consultations with the Early Numeracy Technical Working Group began, and training to connect formal and informal mathematics for children was conducted in Regions V and VI. Math instructional strategies in the two regions were piloted by distributing ABC+ home learning resource kits that included materials for numeracy and learning action cell modules on early-grade mathematics. Activities for developing mathematics skills were only recently implemented, and their impact will only be noticed after some time.

