

Teaching and Learning in Fragile Contexts (TLFC) Policy Brief



Targeted Support Using Culturally Enhanced Activities are Critical for Boosting Literacy Rates Amongst Internally Displaced Children in Cameroon

A policy brief on evidence-based interventions in priority zones

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Executive Summary

Over the years, attempts to eliminate the 'one size fits all' approach in teaching has been futile. Uniform instruction remains persistent. This stiffens progress particularly for the most disadvantaged children. Dione is a 14-year-old primary 4 pupil in a class of 60. Due to the armed conflict in the English-speaking regions of Cameroon, Dione has been out of school for 7 years. She started formal schooling at the official age of 6 but could not continue after completing class one. She fled from Ekona, a village in the South West in a deplorable state after their home was burnt down. She cannot read or spell one to three letter words. Her classmate, Ndive shares a similar plight. He is 9 years old – the official age for class 4. Like Dione, Ndive had to run away from Banso, a village in the North West with the help of relatives after he witnessed the killing of his parents. Ndive is violent towards others. His classmates avoid him. Overtime, Ndive became timid in class and is seen as a 'dullard' by the teacher. He can barely read or spell one to three letter words.

Dione and Ndive represent the broader pupil population affected by an ongoing armed conflict in the English-speaking regions of Cameroon since 2016. This has resulted in about 1 million internally displaced persons including children of school going age (UNHCR, 2024). These children have lost at least 1 year of schooling and for those who eventually re-enrol, they have to struggle with learning loss associated with no schooling as well as traumatic experiences associated with burning down of buildings, incessant shootings, killings and looting. This is exacerbated by large class sizes and irregular school activities. Efforts to re-enrol internally displaced children are working but support is divorced from contextualised activities that are cost effective, interest driven and familiar.

To improve literacy, a co-created intervention was designed using culturally enhanced songs, games and folktales. Baseline data showed that on average, least performing children were able to read only about 6 out of 110 words correctly and spelled 12 out of 56 featured points correctly. These children were assigned to two groups – one that participated in the use of literacy enhanced songs, games and folktales (treatment group) for 4 weeks and those that did not (control group).

Overall, the findings showed improvements in the reading and spelling abilities of children in the treatment group. They were able to read at least 12 words and attempted at least 14 words correctly for spelling on average when compared to the control group. These initial gains allowed the children to catch up. It sparked a sense of hope and optimism for the future. Policy influencing targeted support is required to scale impact across affected regions.

Key Findings

- Combined activities show significant improvement of literacy
- Use of locally enhanced songs had the greatest improvements on literacy
- Reading gaps were reduced by 5 months
- Spelling improvements were most evident in the use initial, final consonants and diagraphs

Context

Since 2016, the English-speaking regions of Cameroon have witnessed an armed conflict characterised by clashes between separatist fighters and the government. This has resulted in about 1 million internally displaced persons including children of school going age (UNHCR, 2024). In 2023, Cameroon ranked 9th out of 14 African countries with the highest internally displaced persons (CODE, 2023). Across the two English-speaking regions, South West is considered relatively safe, hosting several internally displaced children. However, the region continues to suffer from school boycotts due to imposed lockdowns, intermittent shooting, threats and burning down of school buildings. Efforts to re-enrol children is successful but literacy challenges persist. This is compounded for many who typically move from rural to urban areas, where the language of communication at home differs from that in school. Literacy challenges are exacerbated by loss of learning time, poor follow-up and increased class sizes. Policy efforts to support literacy are jeopardised in the context of armed conflict. World Bank (2021); UNESCO (2025) report that 70% of children complete primary schooling without minimum proficiency in reading. Cameroon mirrors this trend an average learning poverty rate of 71.9% (World Bank, 2022). Targeted support is critical for internally displaced children.

Methodology

The project adopted an embedded quasi-experimental design allowing for an observation of children's play activities, quantitative measure of children's literacy and interviews of stakeholders. Findings were embedded and used to develop an intervention in a participatory and consultative process with teachers, parents, school heads and community leaders. 58 children were assigned to both the control and treatment group based on (1) largest reading gap and (2) spelling scores below a threshold of 24. Children in the treatment group were engaged in the use of literacy enhanced songs, games and folktales across 4 weeks with 2 sessions per week that each lasted for 2 hours while the control group received no treatments. The quantitative measures included the Burt Fixed Reading Test for reading and the Word their Way spelling inventory specifically the Primary Spelling Inventory (PSI) for spelling.

Qualitative data was analysed developing themes focused on the effects of enhanced local activities on literacy. Quantitative data was analysed comparing the differences in

literacy scores (reading and spelling) before and after the intervention and across the treatment and control groups. The study gained ethical approval from the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Buea referenced 2024/2426-02/UB/SG/IRB/FHS. Individual assent and consent forms were completed by all participants and necessary approvals obtained from the community stakeholders and the delegation of primary education in the South West Region of Cameroon.

Key Findings

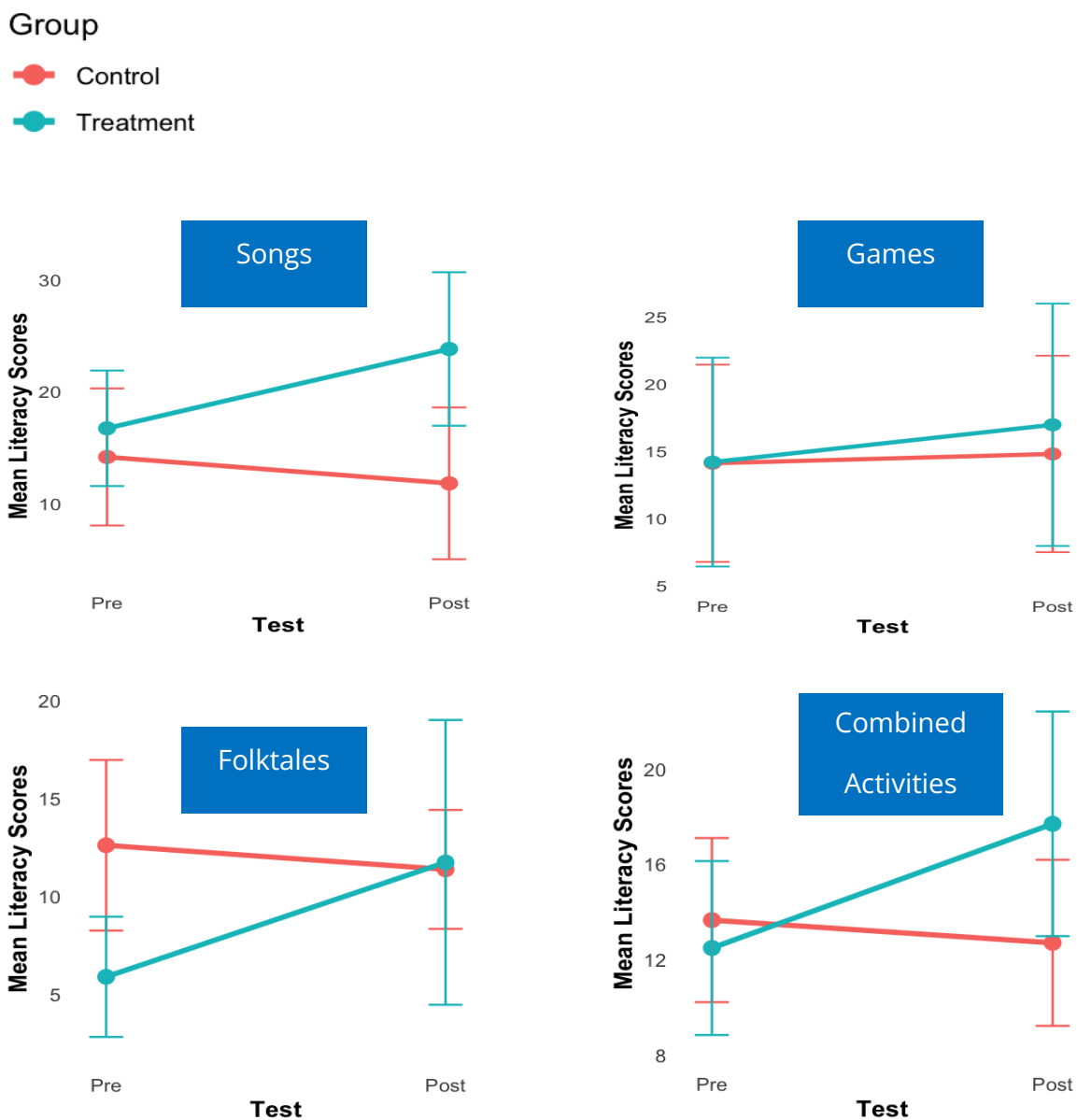
Findings show marked improvement of literacy across all activities in just 4 weeks when performances were compared between treatment and control groups (see Figure 1).

The most significant improvements in literacy were witnessed when the effect of combined activities were analysed. The children who used culturally enhanced activities showed an average literacy gain of 5.2 points while those who did not showed a drop of one point. This means that children who received targeted literacy support read and spelled better while children who did not continued to lag. The approach of targeting specific skills following a diagnostic assessment is one of the strengths of the support that children received. Similar approaches such as Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) show related gains over a two-year period of targeted foundational skills in Zambia (Barros & Lubozha, 2026).

The use of each of the cultural activities resulted in different outcomes. The group that employed the use of locally enhanced songs showed the greatest gains in literacy with 7 points on average even higher than the overall average. The rhythmic, pitch and the use of sounds in songs improves memory processes associated with both reading (including phonology, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension) and spelling (including the use of consonants, vowels, diagraphs, inflected endings). It is also important to note that children who did not participate in the enhanced activities but continued to be taught using non-targeted approaches by their teachers showed a decline in their literacy scores over time. Slater et al. (2014) found a similar trend in their longitudinal study of music and literacy which showed that the longitudinal effects of music instruction on literacy skills deteriorated over time for the group that did not engage in music stimulated literacy. When children do not receive support, their literacy performances will dwindle over time.

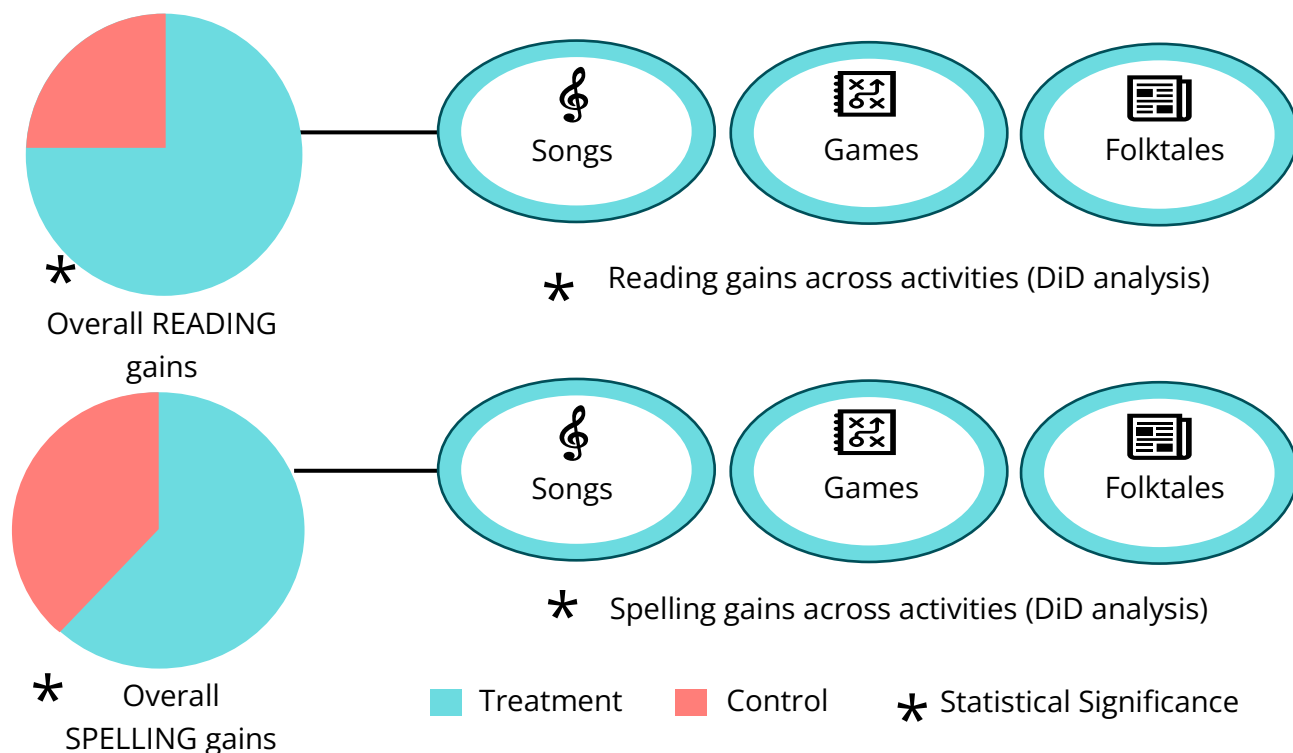
Games and folktales independently showed improvements over time for the treatment group when compared to the control group. However, the differences were negligible when compared to the control group and could not be attributed to the support received. Specific effects on reading and spelling show improvements when time was controlled and changes across groups were compared (see figure 2) with significant improvements again with the use of songs and the combined effect of all activities.

Figure 1: Overall Literacy Performance before and after Intervention



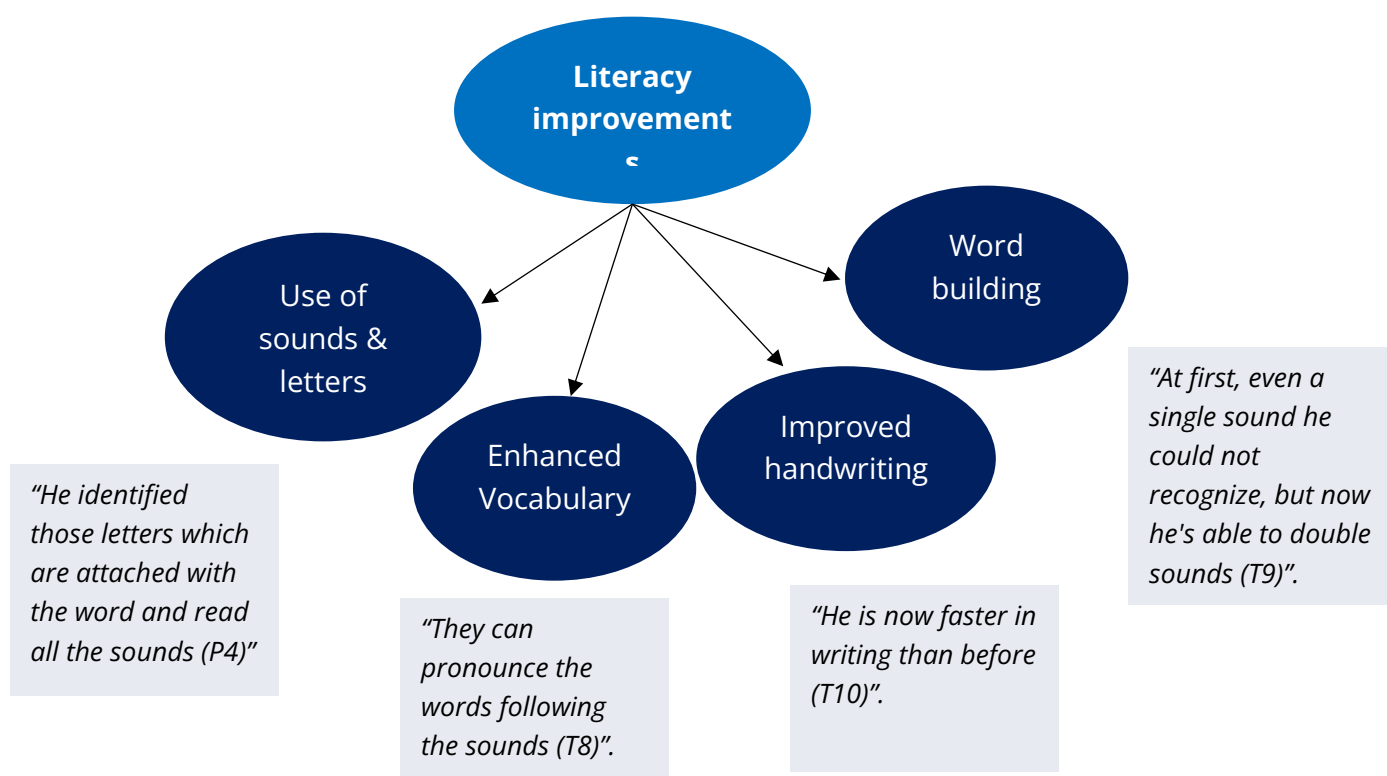
Children in the treatment group were able to read on average additional (four) words correctly reducing reading gaps of about two months while reading gaps for the control group remained stagnant. The greatest gains were experienced with the use of songs in isolation showing a reduction of the reading gap by 5 months compared to 2 months for both games and folktales.

Figure 2 Specific Improvements for Reading and Spelling after Controlling for Time Effects



With regards to spelling, children in the treatment group showed greater gains with an overall of six featured points. However, songs significantly improved the use of final consonants, initial consonants and digraphs while games were limited to digraphs. Analysis of interviews with 19 stakeholders including 11 teachers, 6 parents and 2 head teachers revealed positive gains across four key areas observed at home and in the classroom (see figure 3 with sample direct quotations).

Figure 3: Perceived Effects of Literacy Improvements Using Local Activities



The quantitative gains were corroborated by qualitative insights from teachers, parents and school heads. Beyond children's ability to read and spell addition four words, they were able to show improvements in the use of sounds and letters through identification and association. These are critical initial steps in reading. When children are able to identify letters and match them with their sounds, then they can begin to blend these sounds while learning other principles associated to reading. Children were able to blend words, increase number of words and handwriting. When teachers view about the use of enhanced activities, one of the indicated *"It's quite a motivation. Oftentimes, we are told to use play way method, but we usually think that is only good for level one. But with this, we have realized that play way method is equally applicable to these senior learners (T2)"*. This underscores the limited used of play-based methods in the classroom suggesting the need to emphasise these approaches. Incorporating context-based and interest driven activities and tools are essential. The Cameroon primary school curriculum specifies the use of play-based approaches with specific references to role-playing and drama.

Key Recommendations

To provide targeted support to internally displaced children, policy must support practice.

Policy recommendation 1: Emphasise the use of culturally (locally) responsive play-based approaches in the classroom

The Ministry of Basic Education through the Inspectorate of Pedagogy in charge of National Languages, Literacy and non-formal Education need to emphasise the use of local songs, games and folktales targeting specific literacy skills in the classroom. This requires in-service training of staff to co-create literacy enhanced experiences that is culturally responsive and locally relevant sustaining literacy learning even beyond the immediate school environment.

Policy recommendation 2: Provide remedial support for internally displaced children

The Ministry of Basic Education through the concerted effort of regional delegations and local community leaders need to provide remedial support for internally displaced children. This would require providing extra instruction using play-based approaches such as songs, games and folktales so internally displaced children can catch up.

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Download the full research report at: <https://code.ngo/tlfcresearch/>.

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