



# JUSTIFICATION FOR ADOPTING JOLLY PHONICS TO RAISE LITERACY LEVELS AMONGST ADOLESCENT GIRLS

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## INTRODUCTION

Jolly Phonics uses the **synthetic phonics** approach which involves learning letter sounds rapidly whilst at the same time blending them together to read and segmenting words to write, therefore it is very rigorous.

The program has as its fundamental principle the teaching and learning of the sounds of the letters of the English alphabet as a first step to reading and writing and is also proven for rectifying poor reading strategies learnt by pupils.

This rationale will seek to explain the following:

1. The current literacy challenges for adolescent girls in Nigeria
2. Why Nigerian adolescent girls struggle to read;
3. Evidence that the Jolly Phonics approach works to rectify reading challenges in secondary aged pupils
4. Evidence that a foundation in phonics leads to gains across all areas of the curriculum;
5. Case studies of Jolly Phonics being used for adolescent girls in Nigeria;

## THE CURRENT LITERACY CHALLENGES FOR ADOLESCENT GIRLS

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### READING IS GIVEN LOW PRIORITY

In Nigeria, research<sup>1</sup> maintains that reading often has no place in the school curriculum at the secondary education level and argues that this has a carry-over effect on students' literacy levels in the classroom. Further, there is often complete or partial loss of reading and writing skills among secondary school children in Nigeria attributed to lack of practice among students and inadequate instructional methods adopted by teachers. This poor ability impacts on examination results, for example in 2020 only 32.23 per cent of those who took the senior school certificate examination successfully obtained credit in a minimum of five subjects, including

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.academia.edu/39138623/Literacy\\_in\\_primary\\_and\\_secondary\\_education\\_in\\_Nigeria](https://www.academia.edu/39138623/Literacy_in_primary_and_secondary_education_in_Nigeria)

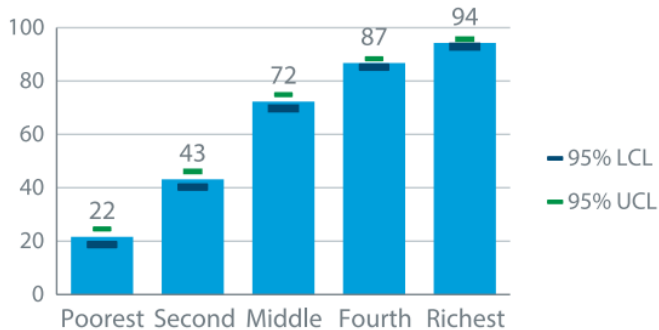
English Language. Mass failure in examinations conducted by WAEC has become a yearly scandal that has sullied the image of secondary school education in Nigeria, and one of the reasons for this failure is poor literacy, with many pupils unable to even construct a sentence properly<sup>2</sup>.

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#### POVERTY INFLUENCES LOW LITERACY RATES

In Nigeria, girls from the poorest areas of Nigeria have the lowest literacy rates, with the poorest girls leaving schools with low literacy rates, as shown by the chart below:

**Literacy rate among young women (age 15-24) by wealth quintiles (MICS 2011)**



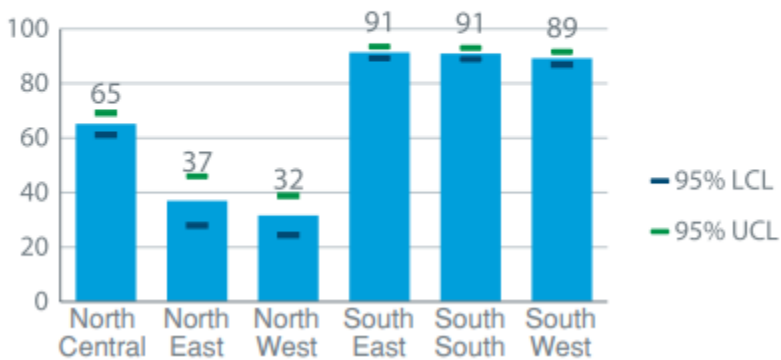
Source: [file \(unicef.org\)](file (unicef.org))

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#### LOCATION INFLUENCES LOW LITERACY RATES

The chart below shows the disparity in literacy rates amongst young women in Nigeria:

**Literacy rate among young women (age 15-24) by geopolitical zone (MICS 2011)**



Source: [file \(unicef.org\)](file (unicef.org))

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.sunnewsonline.com/fighting-poor-exam-results-in-abnormal-times/>

In the southern geopolitical zones, 9 in every 10 young women are literate, compared with fewer than 4 in every 10 in the North-East and North-West geopolitical zones.

*In seven States – Bauchi, Sokoto, Yobe, Zamfara, Jigawa, Kebbi and Niger – fewer than 3 women in every 10 are literate.*

## WHY NIGERIAN ADOLESCENT GIRLS STRUGGLE TO READ

### LEARNING TO READ USING LETTER NAMES

Often Nigerian secondary school pupils struggle to read and write effectively because they have been taught incorrectly to read using the *names* of the letters of the English alphabet. This is challenging for a pupil because in reading, the English letter names make different sounds by way of pronunciation. The letter name ‘a’ for instance is pronounced /a/ (as in apple). But pupils often do not know this because they have not been using a phonics approach.

### WHOLE WORD MEMORISATION

Research shows that a human can only memorise a limited amount of words. Whole word memorisation approach is slow and inefficient. Typically, children can memorize about 800 "sight words" a year. Even by the primary 6, even the most able students could be expected to know only 5000 words<sup>3</sup>. With this limited vocabulary, the child can barely read a newspaper or back of a food packet. Secondary pupils taught with the ‘memorisation method’ become saturated and reach the point where they can no longer memorise more words and access the curriculum – their education comes to a halt.

### SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS PRESSURES

For adolescent girls in Nigeria in particular the reading challenge goes beyond poor education methods. Case studies and research show that girls often do not attend school due to the requirement to stay home and do chores, pressure from their religion, and even fear from terrorist groups who focus on kidnapping girls.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Flesch, Rudolf, Why Jonny Can’t Read and What You Can Do About It

<sup>4</sup> [5 faces of girls’ education in Nigeria | Blog | Global Partnership for Education](#)

Research reveals that poverty is a major barrier to girls' education in all communities. A recent report from Katsina State reveals that *'The reality is that girls dropout of school to assist parents in the provision of basic necessities in the homes, through hawking and other means.'*<sup>5</sup>

Further, in north-eastern and north-western Nigerian states, 29 percent and 35 percent of Muslim children, respectively, receive Qur'anic education, which does not include basic skills such as literacy and numeracy<sup>6</sup>. These children are considered 'out of school' and are also in need of reading intervention.

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## SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

Before students can succeed academically, they must feel safe, both physically and mentally, and to have a safe learning environment, students must feel welcomed, supported, and respected.<sup>7</sup>

Corruption, poor governance, and lack of funding mean that Nigerian schools suffer from an acute lack of basic infrastructure. In some schools, pupils have to study under trees and classrooms are often without roofs or desks to write on. Some schools do not even have teachers to teach the students. Overcrowding also affects teachers' ability to deliver high quality lessons. According to a report by the Data Centre of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation's (UNESCO) Institute for Statistics, of all the 189 countries, Nigeria is among four nations with the highest number of overcrowded classrooms in its secondary schools.

It was also discovered that lack of infrastructural facilities such as adequate classrooms, separate toilets for girls, waterpoints and insecurity pose major impediment to completion of education by the adolescent girls.

Audience Research Report, AGILE Project, Katsina State

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## WHAT UNDERLYING CAUSES CAN RESULT IN ADOLESCENTS NOT BEING ABLE TO READ?

Students with significant dyslexia, ADHD, ASD and other specific learning difficulties can often become teenagers with very low reading levels. The underlying causes of poor reading skills in this demographic are neurological in origin. Among other deficits, poor phonological awareness, working memory and RAN (rapid automatic naming) abilities certainly make reading for these students very challenging and can lead to anxiety or learned helplessness that further compound the situation.

## EVIDENCE THAT THE JOLLY PHONICS APPROACH WILL RECTIFY READING CHALLENGES IN SECONDARY AGED PUPILS

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<sup>5</sup> Report for Adult Audient Research for AGILE States, Katsina State, 2022

<sup>6</sup> [Education | UNICEF Nigeria](#)

<sup>7</sup> Waldman, C (2016), Four Elements for Creating a Positive Learning Environment

Jolly Phonics offers a new approach to learning to read for struggling adolescent readers, and evidence shows that the approach, which uses ‘**synthetic phonics**’ is highly effective.

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## SYNTHETIC PHONICS IS PROVEN FOR SECONDARY AGED PUPILS

Already, secondary pupils worldwide are being offered synthetic phonics as a way of learning to read, such as a secondary school in Kent, UK where twelve-year-old pupils with lower reading ages including those with English as a second language received a strict diet of synthetic phonics taught explicitly in English<sup>8</sup>. The teacher was surprised by their progress and commented,

*‘It’s not only our year 7s who have been benefiting from Synthetic Phonics input. We have older students who have a permanent Teaching Assistant who, with the best will in the world, have struggled continually with how on earth to help them.....One is severely dyslexic and the other has suffered brain damage..... Children who had never been able to read or write - now can.’*

Further, a 2016 study in the Journal of Educational Psychology in Practice, which compared secondary learners using synthetic phonics for one hour per week with a control group, found that after 10 weeks the synthetic phonics group experienced significant gains in Phonic Decoding Accuracy, Word Recognition Accuracy and Phonic Decoding Fluency.<sup>9</sup>

*Evidence from the Journal of Educational Psychology in Practice shows that older children benefit greatly from learning to read or catching up using the synthetic phonics method, for example secondary age children with extremely poor reading skills in UK took part in daily synthetic phonics lessons, and this intervention brought about a statistically significant improvement in the students’ decoding and word reading skills.*

In addition, a 2016 study<sup>10</sup> on the impact of Jolly Phonics for older children in Ghana showed that the Jolly Phonics pupils made a mean improvement in reading age of 28 months in a short 3-month period, with significant gains in results. Interestingly, girls did better than boys and in fact gained 32 months in reading age on average compared to the male who gained 23 months. This suggests that Jolly Phonics is a good match for adolescent girls in Nigeria where the reading challenges are similar to those in Ghana.

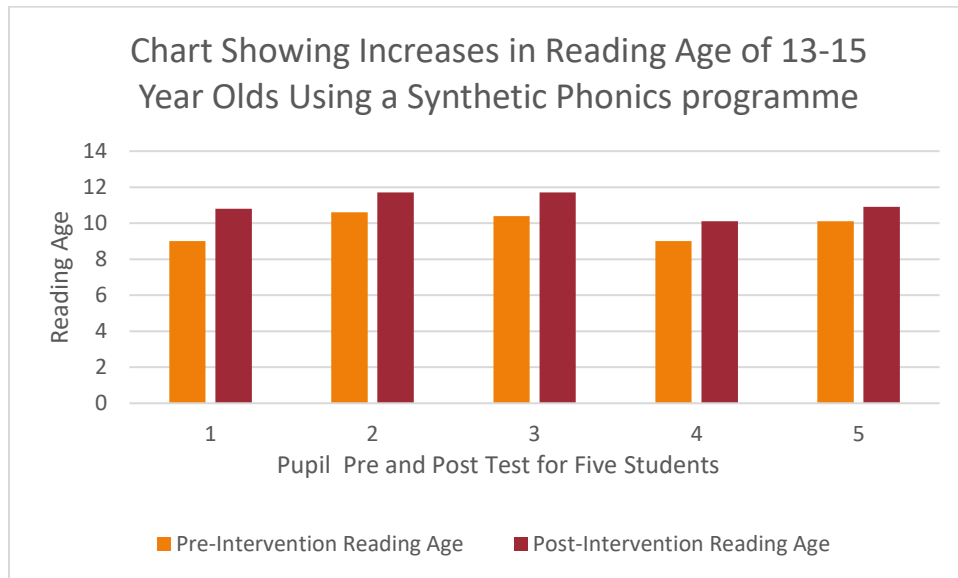
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<sup>8</sup> [https://phonicsinternational.com/Secondary\\_Phonics\\_write\\_up.pdf](https://phonicsinternational.com/Secondary_Phonics_write_up.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> \*Ben Jeffes (2016) Raising the reading skills of secondary-age students with severe and persistent reading difficulties: evaluation of the efficacy and implementation of a phonics-based intervention programme, Educational Psychology in Practice, 32:1, 73-84, DOI: [10.1080/02667363.2015.1111198](https://doi.org/10.1080/02667363.2015.1111198)

<sup>10</sup> <https://jolly2.s3.amazonaws.com/Research/Jolly%20Budies%20Winneba%20Final%20report.pdf>

A study by the National Council for Special Education in Ireland examined the impact of a synthetic phonics programme on adolescent students and revealed a one year increase in reading age over the short 4-6 month period taken to complete the course. The chart below depicts this more clearly:<sup>11</sup>



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## SYNTHETIC PHONICS EVEN WORKS FOR ADULTS

The almost universal assumption that older teenagers and adults would find phonics-based literacy classes ‘infantile’ and boring, was tested back in 2008. It was discovered that the participants loved learning with phonics.

A small project, using synthetic phonics with adults, was set up by the National Research and Development Council for Adult Literacy and Numeracy because the research base for knowing how to improve the teaching of adult literacy was deficient. Synthetic phonics proved to be a huge success with teachers and learners alike. Some of the observations from the project are shown below:

*“The learners made significant progress in reading comprehension and spelling”*

*“This progress was achieved in a very short time (on average between five and six sessions)”*<sup>12</sup>

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## PHONICS CAN BE FUN FOR ADOLESCENT CHILDREN

In an intensive class focused on phonics, ninth graders in a USA school recently learned about adjacent consonants that make one sound, as in “rabbit,” and silent vowels. Students were mostly enthusiastic,

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<sup>11</sup> National Council for Special Education Study, [Level 3: Implementing a 1:1 Reading Programme - Toe by Toe | NBSS](#)

<sup>12</sup> [PG3.35 Progress for adult lit learners v7 final \(ioe.ac.uk\)](#)

competing to spell “repel” and giggling through an example about “dandruff.” After years of frustration, breakthroughs can feel exciting — and empowering.

One student said her grades had improved, and she was thinking about reading “The Vampire Diaries” novels, an undertaking, she said, that she previously would not have considered.<sup>13</sup>

It is very important that older student learn phonics in a multi-sensory way. Jolly Phonics is known for its multi-sensory nature with actions, songs and games to motivate children. A common theme to emerge from literature reviews on phonics interventions with struggling readers is that phonics instruction is most effective when it is explicit, multisensory and systematic<sup>14 15</sup>.

## EVIDENCE FROM NIGERIA

Already numerous studies<sup>16 17 18 19</sup> have shown that Jolly Phonics raises literacy levels of primary aged students in Nigeria, but what about secondary learners? In this section, we share up to date research that shows that Jolly Phonics and systematic phonics approaches in general are effective for secondary Nigerian pupils.

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## EVIDENCE FROM OYO STATE

A study of lower basic secondary learners<sup>20</sup> from ten schools in Oyo State by Emmanuel Alayande University of Education examined the impact of Jolly Phonics using a descriptive survey approach. Teachers were asked about the impact of Jolly Phonics on their performance. The table below shows that there is a significant relationship between systematic teaching of the alphabetic code (performance sound correspondence) and students’ performance at lower basic classes. Since coefficient  $r (=0.242)$ , the significant value (Sig. 2-tailed) is 0.000,  $p$

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<sup>13</sup> [Phonics in High School! - Marginal REVOLUTION](#)

<sup>14</sup> Chen, V. & Savage, R.S. (2014). Evidence for a simplicity principle: Teaching common complex grapheme-to-phonemes improves reading and motivation in at-risk readers. *Journal of Research in Reading*, 37 (2), 196-214.

<sup>15</sup> Duff, F.J., Hayiou-Thomas, M.E., & Hulme, C. (2012). Evaluating the effectiveness of a phonologically based reading intervention for struggling readers with varying language profiles. *Reading & Writing*, 25 (3), 621-640.

<sup>16</sup> [Microsoft Word - Paper to Upload, Effect of Jolly Phonics on Primary School Pupils.docx \(universallearningsolutions.org\)](#)

<sup>17</sup> [Sarah-Shepherd-MA-EID-Dissertation-August-2013.pdf \(universallearningsolutions.org\)](#)

<sup>18</sup> Gittins, L (2017) *Our Children Have a Right to Read* Increasing Literacy Skills in the Early Primary Grades in Developing Contexts: A Case Study of a Rights-Based Initiative in Cross River State, Nigeria.

<sup>19</sup> Chris Counihan, Steve Humble, Louise Gittins & Pauline Dixon (2022) The effect of different teacher literacy training programmes on student’s word reading abilities in government primary schools in Northern Nigeria, *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 33:2, 198-217, DOI: 10.1080/09243453.2021.1991960

<sup>20</sup> Oladeji, F THE USE OF JOLLY PHONICS IN TEACHING OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AT THE LOWER CLASSES IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN OGBOMOSO SOUTH LGA, OYO STATE [Vol. 7 No. 1: April, 2023 Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education \(eksuicje.com\)](#)



**Relationship between systematic teaching of the alphabetic code (performance sound correspondence) and students performance at lower basic classes**

Variables	Level		
Systematic teaching of the alphabetic code (performance sound correspondence)	Pearson Correlation	1	.242**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	20	296
Students' Performance	Pearson Correlation	.242**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	Df	2	18

**\*\*.** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The same study from the Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education further revealed that the actions of teaching blending and segmenting for reading and writing also had a significant relationship to pupils' academic performance.

*The Oyo study into Jolly Phonics for secondary learners recommended that Jolly phonics instructional strategy should be incorporated into the curriculum of the teacher training programmes for effective implementation and that English teachers teaching reading in primary one and two should adopt Jolly phonics instructional strategy for effective teaching so as to achieve maximum objectives of the lesson.*

**EVIDENCE FROM NIGER AND KADUNA STATE: ADOLESCENT GIRLS**

The NGO 'Centre for Girls Education' has been working in a number of Northern Nigerian states to support girls' education. In Niger and Kaduna states, the NGO set up 'safe spaces' to support girls upon completion of primary school. The aim of these spaces is to promote the delay of marriage, nurture the agency and voice of rural adolescent girls, and help them realize their fundamental human and reproductive rights.

Jolly Phonics has been offered in these spaces, and it was observed that after 7 months of intensive Jolly Phonics lessons for married adolescent girls, girls were able to write simple letters to their mentors seeking advice and permission to be absent when necessary. The girls were also able to apply knowledge of Jolly Phonics in the life skills sessions, by jotting important points to remember. This is to enable them to go through what has been taught at home.

Some further testimonials<sup>21</sup> for Jolly Phonics at Married Safe Spaces are shown below:

*“I was not in support of the Safe Spaces (my wife going out every day leaving me to take care of our child at home) at the beginning. After some time, I started realizing that my wife could read and write. A friend of mine sent me a letter and I ask her to read it to me. I was very happy and proud when she read it. Now she helps other children with homework in our compound. I couldn’t be more grateful for this intervention*

(A girl’s husband at Kurmin Bomo during a community engagement event)



*‘Most of our girls support other girls in their communities by teaching them what they have learned in the community, this has increased the number of indirect beneficiaries.’ (CDG Staff member)*

*Observation from Safe Spaces has shown that girls were observed to participate in creating words from sounds when the mentor is writing examples of words on the board. (CDG observation)*

*Girls’ interest has greatly increased during Jolly Phonics. This is because mentors give them the opportunity to write on board and read by themselves. They understand simple commands in English and are able to communicate effectively. (CDG Staff member)*

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#### FURTHER EVIDENCE FROM NORTHERN NIGERIA: ADOLESCENT GIRLS

In a 2-year project implemented for 600 girls by Centre for Girls Education in Northern Nigeria, the first year recorded a 45% increase in the number of girls who could read and write as a result of intensive Jolly Phonics sessions.

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<sup>21</sup> Success Stories on Jolly Phonics for Preschool Safe Spaces, Centre for Girls’ Education, 2023

In the second year, 70% of the girls could read and write effectively as indicated by the quarterly assessment conducted in Safe Spaces groups, as well as the placement and termly examinations conducted by formal schools.

Some of the girls enrolled in junior secondary school 1, were immediately promoted to junior secondary school 2, because of their exceptional performance during the enrolment examination. Most of the girls were also given leadership positions in their schools due to their outstanding academic performance.

Married adolescents in Kaduna State have demonstrated their improved literacy skills by coaching their husbands in simple literacy and spoken English, while the unmarried girls support their younger siblings with basic literacy and numeracy which has encouraged the community members to garner more support for the Safe Spaces.

In interviews conducted with parents of girls, their responses showed that their perception of girls' age of marriage has changed. Parents now keep their daughters in Safe Spaces, schools, and vocational programs because they believe they are learning. With Jolly Phonics, they can read and write, pronounce words, and teach others. This has really changed the perception of communities because they see so many alternatives to early marriage.



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#### EVIDENCE FROM KWARA STATE

A 2019 study<sup>22</sup> targeted SS2 Senior Secondary School students in Edu, Kwara State and examined the impact of phonics on secondary learners' oral English skills. It revealed that, *'there is a statistically significant effect of phonics charts on senior secondary school students' achievement in Oral English in Edu, Kwara State'*

The study then went on to examine the impact of phonics charts on girls and boys. It revealed that whilst both genders outperformed the control group significantly, girls performed better than boys – this is a positive sign for the implementation of phonics programmes for adolescent girls.

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<sup>22</sup> [af2b0a461cdab5463da39bae1a235a58eb07.pdf \(semanticscholar.org\)](https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/af2b0a461cdab5463da39bae1a235a58eb07)

## DISCUSSION

Educational opportunities for adolescent girls are at a stand-still in Nigeria; with mass failure across all of the core WAEC subjects. This paper demonstrates that synthetic phonics works for secondary aged children across the world, but most especially girls in Nigeria, and it has the potential to rapidly increase the percentage of girls who can read and write, thus impacting on all other curriculum areas. Since Jolly Phonics is already well established in Nigeria, and well embedded in every Nigerian state, the obvious next step is to provide Jolly Phonics tuition to adolescent girls who have missed the opportunity to learn to read and write in primary schools.

Naturally, whilst secondary pupils can find phonics fun, there is a need to adapt the Jolly Phonics programme to make it a fast-track scheme. This can be achieved by doubling the pace of letter sound and lesson delivery, and then adding on a term of Jolly Grammar, to boost fluency and comprehension, all in a one-year programme. Furthermore, rapid roll out and training on how to use decodable story books, will help to boost girls' fluency.

Partnering with organisations who already work with girls (such as Centre for Girls Education) on writing new stories relevant to adolescent girls will enable further interest and relevance for the girls as they embark on their reading adventure.

Girls also need to be shown how to quickly apply their new-found reading skills in a rapidly changing world, through being exposed to digital literacy programmes, giving them tools to communicate effectively. both in the community and the workplace

In response to the research in this paper Universal Learning Solutions has developed a project plan that can provide adolescent girls with basic literacy skills, digital literacy advancement, along with a boost to their ongoing fluency and comprehension skills. This plan includes:

- ✓ Adaptation of Jolly Phonics and Jolly Grammar materials to match the interest levels of adolescent girls
- ✓ Initial training of secondary school teachers in Jolly Phonics and Jolly Grammar for adolescent girls
- ✓ Fast track teaching of adolescent girls in Jolly Phonics and Jolly Grammar
- ✓ Provision and training on decodable story books for fluency and comprehension
- ✓ Writing of topic-relevant stories for girls in particular on subjects such as menstruation, health, hygiene, self-confidence and leadership.
- ✓ Development of learning content to be put on tablets to be used for after-school independent learning, including the development of an offline app version of Jolly Classroom
- ✓ Installation of the new "Jolly Classroom" on tablets for adolescent girls; Jolly Classroom is a digital learning platform for Jolly Phonics, containing hundreds of activities for children to practice and develop their reading and writing skills.
- ✓ Provision of training on digital literacy skills incorporating the Jolly Classroom, Jolly Phonics App, Decodable Stories App, and specific skills programmes including GCFLearnFree.org has lessons that can

help improve girls' digital skills, including Microsoft Office, Windows or Mac Basics, Social Media, computer and email writing.

- ✓ Use of Jolly Monitor to check teachers' progress with the implementation of Jolly Phonics
- ✓ Regular monitoring of girls' reading and writing skills development using the Jolly Monitor App
- ✓ Use of wind-up solar powered MP3 players (Jolly Players) to further motivate girls working in small groups, to read and learn with Jolly Phonics and decodable story books.

These provisions can either be delivered in after-school or out-of-school Safe Spaces, or in a classroom environment. Jolly Phonics has been proven to work in all these scenarios. Further Jolly Phonics has been proven to work using remote provisions (TV, Radio, whatsapp etc) through the successful NEED project<sup>23</sup> which provided thousands of children with Jolly Phonics learning when schools closed due to COVID; therefore the delivery can also be adapted to remote learning should this be needed, in hard-to-reach areas.

## CONCLUSION

Education providers who desire to focus on girls' education in Nigeria should first tackle one of the key challenges – lack of basic literacy skills. Unless a girl is able to read and write effectively, she will not be able to begin to work on her broader life skills or indeed digital literacy skills needed to thrive in this rapidly changing world. Through rapid implementation of Jolly Phonics and Jolly Grammar, girls will have more chance of remaining in school, lifting up their community, passing their exams, improving the health of her community and influencing old views on the position of girls within the family. Jolly Phonics has been tried and tested in Nigeria and internationally, is easy to deliver, and affordable to produce; thus it should be rapidly adopted as the first choice for supporting literacy skills of adolescent girls in Nigeria.



<sup>23</sup> Kano State NEED Project report, 2019; Katsina State NEED project report 2020, Zamfara State NEED project report, 2021

