

Building a Reading Culture through Partnerships

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Abstract:

Globally, 250 million children (Teaching and learning, 2013/14) lack access to relevant and fun reading materials. We know that access to books is important for lifelong learning and that children growing up in homes with many books get three years more schooling than children from bookless homes (Evans, Kelley, Sikora & Treiman, 2010). Literacy is a vitally important gateway to livelihood development. Despite investments in improving reading performance among children, global literacy growth rates are stagnating ("The Making of Literate Societies," 2006). There are three primary drivers behind this problem. First, there is a disconnect between formal education and informal learning. At most, children only spend about 15% of their time inside a classroom. To gain skills and an interest in reading, children need support beyond the classroom. Community based institutions, like public libraries and other non-formal out-of-school reading settings, are poised to provide this support. Second, parents have largely been removed from this discussion. Schools often struggle to promote a school-home linkage that provides opportunities for meaningful parental engagement, limiting the opportunity for children to continue reading outside of class. Third, many young readers are not learning to associate reading with enjoyment. Frequently, donors and governments prioritize providing textbooks over books that foster interest in reading. Textbooks simply reinforce reading as a rote means to receiving grades. Therefore, one critical approach to addressing these drivers is through partnerships. Creating partnerships at the community, public institution and donor levels for leverage of in-kind knowledge, services and financial resources can lead to effective changes in children's reading.

Keywords: partnerships, reading, early-grade, libraries and communities

Introduction

This paper examines practical responses to the following question: How do we build a culture of reading through partnerships?

Empowering and ensuring a child learns to read and in turn loves to read for lifelong learning requires partnership. Partnership is required not only at the household and community levels (between the child, family, community members, school, and local libraries,) but also at a global level to infuse technical and financial engagement to support local reading programs. This paper will demonstrate the value of partnerships at multiple levels through short case studies reflecting the power of leveraging critical skills and resources to enable a child to read.

Despite investments in improving reading performance, global literacy rates are stagnating (“The Making of Literate Societies,” 2006). Today, 250 million children lack access to reading materials (“Teaching and learning,” 2013/14). This is a critical challenge to improving reading outcomes. Both the sheer amount and the choice of reading materials seem to make a difference in children’s reading (Wigfield & Asher, 1984). Therefore, there is a critical need for sufficient local language content that is relevant and engaging for children. Additionally, children need a supportive and engaging environment that helps foster a positive culture around reading. And evidence shows that parents and communities also need an enabling environment that supports them in transforming their behaviours to better support reading (Cao et al., 2014). Without these key elements, appropriate content and community engagement, children do not progress in their reading.

Lack of books in languages that children understand

Even countries that receive significant investment in early grade reading programs are unable to make relevant and engaging reading materials universally available. In developing and transitioning countries, printing and publishing is cost-prohibitive and highly centralized. Ministries of Education (MoE) issue contracts to publishing houses, but only invest in the dominant or national language (or limit procurements to western publishing houses at great cost), making it difficult to source printed content in local languages. Book scarcity in schools is widespread. As primary school enrolments have risen globally over the past 20 years and government education budgets have been under increased pressure, book expenditures have not kept pace, and sometimes decreased, as the number of students has grown (Askerud, 1997). This lack of supply also means print materials are too expensive for families to purchase and many libraries are unable to maintain relevant collections. The onus is often placed on schools to connect learners to reading materials, but schools alone cannot address this issue. While many governments have made the important shift to Mother Tongue Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE), this has increased the need for both the creation and distribution of books for young readers in languages that publishers have not typically represented. Because it is difficult to keep pace with this increased demand for mother tongue reading materials, this has presented an opportunity for organizations and communities to begin filling this gap.

Reading is not associated with enjoyment

All too frequently, donors and governments prioritize providing textbooks over children’s books that are interesting to read. Textbooks are the main tool for teaching children how to read. However, enjoyable supplementary materials reinforce what students learn in and outside the classroom and are important to developing foundational early literacy skills. Children need to have ‘time on the task’ to read, which is one of the ‘5 Ts’ of reading.¹ Time spent reading independently (or reading for fun) is linked to improved reading outcomes and reading comprehension skills (Clark & Rumbold, 2006). Books that are contextually appropriate as well as engaging and entertaining help motivate children to

¹ 5 Ts - testing, time, texts, mother tongue and teaching of reading

engage in independent reading. This in turn helps improves the child's reading outcomes and helps to promote a lifelong love of reading.

Families and communities have largely been removed from this discussion

The home environment is the single greatest predictor of future reading success, regardless of geography or socio-economic status (Dowd, Friedlander, Guajardo, Mann, & Pisani, 2013). Studies repeatedly show that the amount of time children spend reading with their parents or caregivers is a key predictor of future reading achievement (Hanemann, 2015). Schools often struggle to engage parents and seldom provide opportunities for meaningful engagement, limiting the opportunity for children to continue reading outside of the classroom. Even though reading in the mother tongue has demonstrated improved learning outcomes, the parents' lack of literacy skills has intensified the challenge to support children's reading.

Achieving a transformation in reading outcomes for the 250 million children today and in future generations requires partnerships at all levels of society. Donor agencies, Ministries, implementers and communities recognize the power of working together for the improvement of reading gains for children. In this paper, we will examine how World Vision² and IREX³ are addressing these challenges through partnerships to promote a culture of reading in communities across the globe. This paper will examine three case examples and provide actionable recommendations for partnerships in reading programs.

Case Example #1: Partnerships for improved reading resources in Ethiopia

World Vision (WV) focuses education resource investments on improving early grade reading skills for children. This includes investments in provision of student assessment data; teacher training on pedagogical content knowledge in reading, community engagement in children's learning and local creation and procurement of relevant reading materials.

This example focuses on community partnerships associated with literacy programs in Ethiopia (Unlock Literacy⁴), which focuses on community engagement in reading, locally created teaching and learning aids and locally generated stories. These elements have supported the program to harness indigenous knowledge and expertise to build a culture of reading.

Family and community members must invest different types of resources for children to learn to read and to foster a love of reading. Resources include time, space, knowledge, skills, language, positive attitudes and financing (e.g. in-kind). While monetary resources are important, these other assets may be more vital in positively impacting children's reading. Dei (2008) expressed that "transformational African education must find ways to tap the cultural resource knowledge of local peoples." He cited that "it is common knowledge that local African proverbs, parables, tales, folklore, fables, myths and mythologies contain words of wisdom and important information about society and its peoples and the interactions of culture and nature. These different lines of cultural knowledge have a long history and are connected to the traditions of local communities and their understandings of the social and natural worlds (Dei:239)" (as cited in Trudell & Ndunde, 2015).

² World Vision is a Christian humanitarian aid, development, and advocacy organization, founded in 1950 and operational in nearly 100 countries.

³ IREX is an International NGO that empowers youth, cultivates leaders, strengthens institutions, and extends access to quality education and information.

⁴Unlock Literacy (UL) is World Vision International's Literacy program from the project model known as Literacy Boost. It includes literacy improvement tools Literacy Boost (LB) developed by Save the Children, with whom WV partnered in a pilot of LB across 17 World Vision national offices. Literacy Boost is a copyrighted tool designed, developed, and owned by Save the Children. A key feature of UL is the community development of Teaching and Learning Materials (TLM).

Community partnership for time and space

Unlock Literacy in Ethiopia draws on community partnership through resource provision of time and space to promote book lending systems using local level book banks. The book banks are a key input for successful reading camps⁵. Children are excited to check out books they can take home to read with their parents/caregivers and siblings. This access is important for lifelong learning. Children growing up in homes with many books get 3 years more schooling than children from bookless homes (Evans, Kelley, Sikora, & Treiman, 2010). Unlock Literacy also supports families in creating their own home reading corners, and guides parents to dedicate daily time to reading, even those parents that are semi- or non-literate (Box A). The community's investment of human resources and World Vision's investment of reading materials, provides a strategic and potentially more sustainable partnership model for addressing access to reading materials at a local level.

Communities partnering to invest in reading

Families and communities have found innovative ways to invest in early grade reading, especially through the provision of reading resources. Through in-kind resources, communities identify the locations and finance the construction of reading camps that are attached to people's homes, places of worship, or in other central locations where children from many villages can gather (Box B).

Reading camp materials need to be replenished as the number of readers and frequency of use increases. In rural communities, finding materials to use for literacy activities can be a challenge. There is a perception that learning materials need to be

Box B

One father, with a few huts on his property, decided to move his belongings out of one of them and invite the reading camp to be held there. Another family had part of a building which they were using as a store to keep grain. They said that they have seen how much their child has benefited from the reading camp and wanted to support it, so they offered their store area to create another reading camp. These families have not only contributed to children's literacy, but have also gained social capital within their neighborhood as they are now publicly praised as examples for other parents to support their children's education.

purchased from town and have a glossy finish. Yet, through dialogue with communities and demonstration of how locally available materials (clay, sticks, bottle caps, etc.), can be effectively used, families and communities have created reading corners in their homes using their own materials. Despite this, the challenge remains to replace local language books to ensure enough variety and quantity of high quality reading materials for children to continue developing their reading skills. WV Ethiopia is addressing this issue by partnering with local publishers to produce locally relevant stories. They have partnered with and trained seven local publishers, universities and government regional education bureaus and published nearly 500 culturally appropriate book titles in seven local languages. Through this process, 1.5 million copies have been printed to reach 1.3 million children.

Partnering with communities to build on knowledge and transform attitudes

With many early primary curricula taught in the mother tongue, there is a growing need for reading materials in these languages. Even as communities and schools have changed their attitudes and are

Box A

Topics from Parent Awareness Workshops

- Children's language and literacy development
- Everyday activities for reading readiness
- Reading for and with children
- Creating materials to help children read
- Establishing reading corners at home

⁵ Reading Camps are fun and engaging extracurricular spaces with book banks for children to be involved in structured reading practice and have access to supplementary books under the guidance of a Reading Camp Facilitator.

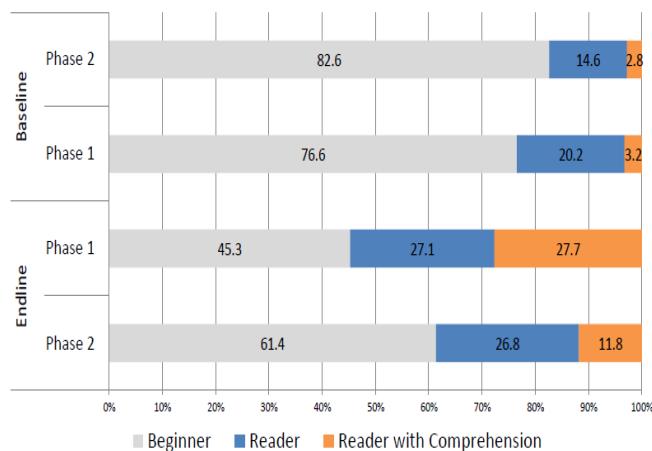
demanding more mother tongue materials, some of these languages consist of small language groups. This is a challenge because “this may mean small print runs for minority languages, making them less attractive to commercial publishers” (Benson, 2004). To temporarily remedy this challenge, WV Ethiopia has devised ways of writing original materials in several local languages. WV Ethiopia draws on community partnerships through local language boards, which leverage community expertise to develop relevant content.

Community and government partnership

Research affirms that communities greatly value their mother tongues and heritage that is associated with their language and culture. When the mother tongue is seen in print in the official context of schooling it elevates its status and usefulness in the eyes of both speakers and non-speakers (Benson, 2004). Supplementary activities that use mother tongue, such as the reading camps in Ethiopia, are helping to reinforce the use of mother tongue and providing increased opportunities to learn. Reading camps serve as extracurricular opportunities for young children to develop a love of reading, yet challenges remain with sustainability and volunteer retention. Local volunteers, often youth who have completed at least a primary education level facilitate these camps, represent a critical in-kind financial contribution to the program.

In the initial phase of the reading camp, children’s enthusiasm for activities buoys the facilitators engagement. However, facilitators’ volunteerism and enthusiasm can dwindle after even a few months. Therefore, communities must support the recruitment of new volunteers, community-based organizations must support the training and integration of new members, and collectively, communities and organizations must seek alternative livelihood and professional development opportunities for volunteer retention. This engagement in reading camps has presented great opportunities for youth. The local level ministry of education has offered some youth volunteers employment at pre-schools and primary schools. The impact of WV’s reading intervention is also evidenced in the increase of children that are reading with comprehension. (Figure 1). In phase 1 only 3.2% of children were reading with comprehension. At end line this increased to 27.7%.

Figure 1: Oromia Region in Ethiopia (2015)



Partnerships for improved and increased reading materials for children happen at various levels. It is first critical to mobilize communities to create demand for literacy. Families can become empowered to utilize their existing knowledge, change their attitudes, and actively engage with their children’s reading. Governments are also important partners to promote sustainability of supplementary reading resources and give more prominence to local knowledge by validating locally created texts. Early engagement of universities and training publishers to create relevant and fun reading content is another essential component. While there has been progress in the development of content and to some extent printing and distribution, the cost to do this effectively at scale through open source licensing still needs to be addressed in partnership with publishers and the ministry of education.

Case Example #2: Public Institutions –Library and school partnerships in Bangladesh

The Bangladesh primary education sector has made progress toward ensuring universal education. By 2013 the primary school enrolment rate reached 97% (“Education for All,” 2015). Still, issues persist. Quality of instruction is inconsistent and overcrowding in schools means many primary school students must attend classes in shifts, thereby greatly reducing the number of contact hours they have in the classroom. During these limited contact hours, reading time is only a small portion of the curriculum. While this issue has been cited in many country contexts (Friedlander, 2015), anecdotal evidence suggests this is a particularly acute challenge in Bangladesh. This results in extremely limited exposure to books and limited time dedicated to learning to read in the classroom. While this issue requires sweeping institutional changes and new investments from government, there are other ways in which communities can respond to this challenge.

Public libraries as community partners for reading activities

There is a widely accepted notion that the library is naturally positioned to provide children with a space to learn and to develop a love for reading (Albright, Delecki & Hinkle, 2009). But historically, libraries in Bangladesh have not directed services toward children. Through a series of consultative meetings with stakeholders in the library community in Bangladesh, IREX learned that many libraries focus their energies on providing a quiet space for students to study and to read. In short, the prevailing notion was that the library is a place for the literate, so why provide services to children that are learning how to read?

In response to these revelations, IREX, in partnership with Save the Children in Bangladesh, launched the Beyond Access Bangladesh project. Save the Children in Bangladesh is currently managing a large scale early grade reading activity aimed at providing schools and teachers with training and resources to improve reading performance for primary school children. IREX, through the Beyond Access program, seeks partners globally to co-design and co-implement programs that transform public libraries into vibrant spaces that respond to pressing community needs. In the case of Bangladesh, IREX recognized the untapped potential for public libraries to help cultivate a reading culture among children and to provide space and resources that schools are unable to offer due to overcrowding and limited contact hours. Most importantly, the program provides librarians with tools and techniques for engaging nearby schools to raise the profile of the library as a space that can supplement a child’s formal education.

The Beyond Access Bangladesh program kicked off in March 2015. In total, 20 libraries across Bangladesh took part in the program. IREX formed a committee of partners, including Save the Children in Bangladesh, the Department of Public Libraries, and a collection of regionally-based NGOs. These partners would ensure technical capacity for participating librarians as well as sustained linkages between libraries and nearby primary schools. In 2015, IREX hosted a two-part training for librarians. The first training focused on the basics of early grade literacy and the role that libraries can play. The second training introduced new tools for libraries to offer children through their reading programs. These included new learning materials, including tablets loaded with Bangla-language learning apps.

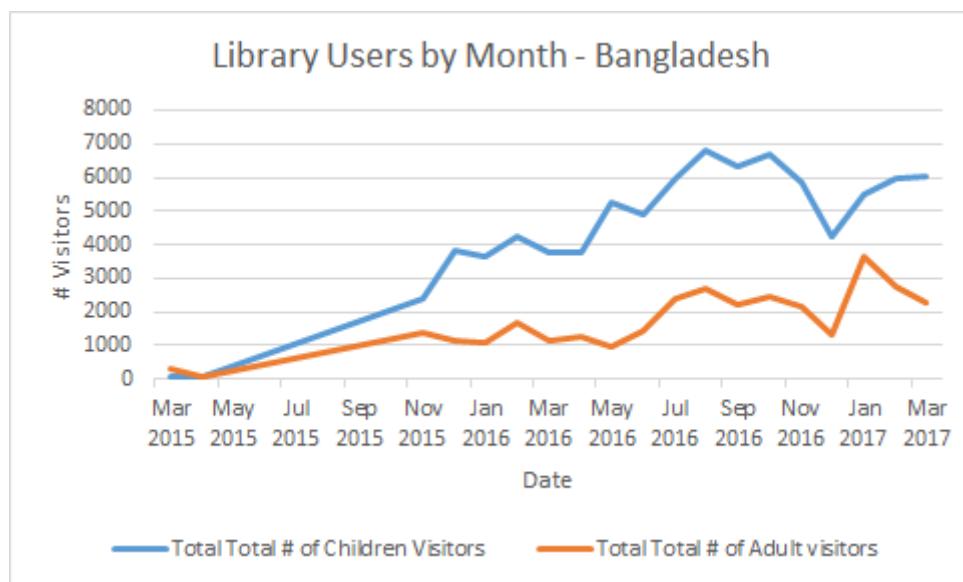
Public libraries as reading activity extensions of primary schools

Before the training events, none of the libraries offered services to children. The goal of the training was to show how libraries could transform their space and offer new services with limited resources. Librarians learned how to expand their collection of children’s materials; how to advocate to municipal authorities or community leaders to secure materials or resources to create a dedicated children space; and how to engage parents and to encourage parents to take part in the reading experience of their children. One of the most important components was training librarians on how to engage nearby primary schools. The success of the libraries’ transformation hinged on students being aware of the libraries’ new services. Librarians began holding meetings with school principals and teachers. They then began hosting information sessions and demos with classes.

Performance Monitoring Results

The immediate results were striking. Overall library visitation was quite low before the start of the program. But in the months following libraries' outreach to community members and schools, visitation began a steady rise. It is important to note that at the beginning of the project, adults were more likely to visit the library than children, but the most recent data suggests that three times as many children visit the participating libraries than adults (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Beyond Access Bangladesh visitation (2017)



Evaluation Findings

In 2015, IREX commissioned a third-party evaluation to help understand the extent to which the training and subsequent new services contributed to improved parental involvement and school-library partnership. The evaluation was broad in scope, seeking to understand how libraries have changed perceptions of community members and to what extent partnerships between the library and various community institutions have impacted participation in library activities. In turn, the evaluation sought to understand if libraries are providing increased exposure to text for children that are faced with limited contact hours in the classroom.

The evaluation found a significant shift in teachers' awareness of library services and willingness to encourage students to participate in library-led reading activities. Per the evaluation baseline report, schools in the Beyond Access project catchment area were not aware of any library activities involving children. The evaluation found that only one school at the beginning of the project was directly collaborating with a Beyond Access-supported library. Because of this, teachers were not encouraging children to visit the library outside of school hours. The results from the end line reveal that the librarians' on-going awareness raising efforts--specifically, holding meetings with principals and presenting to classrooms--have resulted in increased buy-in from teachers. They now promote the services to students and actively encourage library visitation.

Teachers have reported that they now perceive themselves as beneficiaries of the project. While anecdotal, respondents have expressed confidence that the increased attendance at the libraries is having a direct impact on students' attention, engagement in school activities, and overall performance. The mother of one library visitor reported:

“...I became so surprised and happy when I came to know that my daughter obtained the second place in her class (grade 3) out of 60 students. My daughter’s roll number was 51 during the second terminal examination, but during the final examination she was promoted from grade 2 to 3, with second position in the class. This happened because of my daughter’s regular attendance in the library. I think this library has a vital role to enhance children’s performance to do better in the formal school.”

Evaluation results are complemented by project monitoring data that shows a steady and sustained increase in library visitation by grade 1-4 students after libraries commenced outreach activities to schools. While other efforts no doubt contribute to this increase (including improved signage, word of mouth, parental influence, etc.), the role of teachers in encouraging children to spend their non-school hours at the library is notable.

Case Example #3: Leveraging multi-agency initiatives for change

As demonstrated in the first two case studies, partnerships are critical at the community and institutions levels in a country. Yet, partnerships at an international and donor level are also vital for ensuring children learn to read. These organizations can infuse targeted support for the development of tools that can support local and national initiatives. All Children Reading: A Grand Challenge for Development (ACR GCD), a partnership between USAID, World Vision and the Australian Government, and IREX through its Beyond Access program, formed a partnership in 2014 to leverage their respective technical and financial strengths and global reach to demonstrate the power of partnership and the potential transformational results at a community level.

ACR GCD’s work sought to close the gap many children face in accessing relevant reading material in local language. One element to addressing this problem requires that authors, content creators, and others can easily create more materials, reflecting local contexts and interests of children. ACR GCD through its *Enabling Writers* competition, sourced a software to easily create leveled and decodable reading materials called Bloom. *Bloom*, developed by SIL, is a software solution that allows authors to easily create and export texts in mother tongue languages. It is the only open source, book writing software that can be used offline and guide the production of decodable text and leveled readers in any language.

IREX, leveraged ACR GCD’s investment in Bloom, to roll-out a community-based workshop promoting local book creation to a national network of libraries in the Philippines that were participating in IREX’s Beyond Access initiative. IREX and its local partner, the Molave Development Foundation, found immediate enthusiasm within the library network. Primarily because the approach provided libraries with an immediate opportunity to support the local need for reading materials as a part of the Department of Education’s move to MTB-MLE in their primary grade classrooms. Libraries have partnered with other local educators to produce over 1,200 titles in mother tongue languages. Partnering together to produce content in mother tongue languages has formed a natural opportunity to engage with the community and promote the use of these books and a broader culture of reading both inside and outside the classroom.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The above three case studies offer critical insights into the operationalising of programs to ensure effective partnership at community, public institution and global initiatives. From these case studies come three overall recommendations that are applicable in all programming efforts to support reading.

Recommendation 1: Maximize parental/caregiver engagement

Sensitization among parents throughout the process of planning and implementing community reading and literacy opportunities is critical for their success and sustainability. It is not enough to bring parents in just at the beginning, but they need to be continuously engaged in different ways and provided with the tools and space to decide how they can best contribute. Parent/caregiver participation in reading programs is imperative to ensure quality and ownership. One method that should be piloted with parents is home visits. Home visits would provide greater support to parents at the household level to encourage reading, especially for those children who are struggling readers.

Recommendation 2: Build partnerships with natural allies

As an institution, libraries are particularly agile. Unlike schools, or other government bodies, libraries have a broad mandate to connect all community members with information. As such, libraries can reach and partner with a diverse range of stakeholders and counterpart institutions. Schools and libraries are natural allies, but often do not coordinate as closely as they could. Libraries support the general education mission of schools, but they can take on a far more intentional role in supporting specific school initiatives. At a local level, libraries can serve on education councils, and meet with school administrators and teachers to learn how they can partner together on initiatives. Conversely, schools and national or international education actors can seek out libraries and offer training and support to more actively integrate libraries into existing programs.

Recommendation 3: Start small but with great vision

With a growing set of global education actors and initiatives in support of reading, partnership should be front and centre to ensure collective impact at global, national and community levels. As partnerships take time and can often be bureaucratically complex, start small with a single activity likely to succeed. However, implement the activity with a vision for expanding the partnership and activities. The challenge of ensuring all children read surpasses the best of any one organization's or agency's efforts; therefore, look for opportunities to partner on new efforts as ACR GCD and IREX have done, to support global, national and local application of resources.

The three case examples offer a snapshot of the potential of multi-level partnerships. Still, there is much need to continue exploring and innovating to create sustainable access to quality reading resources for all children, especially those most disadvantaged. If the right mix of partners form coalitions that can mobilize resources for books, it can be possible that relevant and fun books would be more available for children to learn to read, leading to a love for reading.

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