Making Community Engagement Work for Early Reading

Family, caretaker and community involvement in education correlates with improved literacy achievement. But in many communities, children only practice reading in the classroom — guided by overworked teachers with limited resources and time. Here’s how IREX’s comprehensive approach is helping libraries and community spaces meet family literacy needs.

Making community engagement systematic through libraries

IREX’s approach is a concrete response to an increasing awareness of the obstacles to reading in many developing countries, including a lack of trained teachers, limited instructional time, insufficient reading materials, and low community engagement.

Public libraries equipped with suitably trained staff, resources in local languages, and regular family literacy activities present a solution to the literacy problem. Libraries provide a space for facilitating public reading activities and caretaker-child joint reading, accessing local reading materials, and conducting community reading fairs or other literacy activities.

Applying its grassroots community mobilization approach, IREX helps make use of existing community libraries and librarians, working with them to develop an action plan to expand library services that promote reading activities for children.

The libraries implement innovative services to promote early grade reading combining traditional methods with appropriate technology. Building on IREX’s past success, the approach emphasizes use of existing knowledge, resources and technology.

Family engagement improves children’s reading outcomes

Community and family engagement in education is central to improving education and reading outcomes. Community members play a vital role in removing barriers to quality education, mobilizing resources, and increasing school accountability. Research clearly and consistently shows that family and community involvement in education correlates with higher academic performance, school quality improvement, and literacy achievement.

Family involvement in reading has also been positively and significantly linked to children’s reading motivation and reading fluency.

IREX’S THEORY OF CHANGE »

When libraries are equipped with well-trained staff able to facilitate interactive and engaging reading programs for children, able to support the use of technology for reading, and able to increase parental involvement in children’s reading, reading outcomes will be measurably improved.
Family involvement in the school is also a strong predictor of reading achievement. Family involvement was mentioned among the most important activities to improve reading performance according to school directors interviewed in the USAID/Mozambique midline evaluation. Involving the community and caretakers in the effort to teach children to read was considered one of the most sustainable activities that could be implemented beyond the USAID project.

Community and family involvement was also found to have a significant impact on reading outcomes. A meta-analysis of 16 family literacy interventions revealed that interventions in which caretakers tutored their children using specific literacy activities (e.g., joint reading) produced larger effects on children’s emergent literacy and reading achievement than passive strategies in which caretakers listened to their children read books. USAID’s global efforts indicate that families and community members require targeted training to support children’s reading and produce measurable reading progress of young children. To date, practitioners have struggled to find a systematic model for increasing family and community engagement.

EGRA studies support the correlation between reading and community

In Ethiopia, family involvement in reading was statistically significantly correlated with oral reading fluency outcomes. Having a family where the mother, father, and siblings assist with homework improved oral reading fluency scores by an average of 17.9 words per minute. In Ghana, students with higher scores on ERGA assessments were more likely to have assistance with homework at home.

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Outcomes. USAID’s principles for early grade reading

Recognizing the vital role of community members and caretakers in influencing early grade reading outcomes, a key expected result of the 2011-2015 USAID Education Strategy is to create greater community and family engagement in education. USAID’s first principles for early grade reading programs stress family involvement as an integral part of such programs. The guide calls on all initiatives that focus on reading to explicitly attend to fostering “home-to-school” and “school-to-home literacy connections.”

Active versus passive family involvement

While caretaker involvement can take many forms, evidence from reading research and past USAID experience has shown that active rather than passive caretaker involvement has a greater effect on reading acquisition. A meta-analysis of 16 family literacy interventions revealed that interventions in which caretakers tutored their children using specific literacy activities (e.g., joint reading) produced larger effects on children’s emergent literacy and reading achievement than passive strategies in which caretakers listened to their children read books. USAID’s global efforts indicate that families and community members require targeted training to support children’s reading and produce measurable reading progress of young children. To date, practitioners have struggled to find a systematic model for increasing family and community engagement.

How existing public libraries can help solve the community literacy challenge

IREX has developed a model for increasing community and parental engagement in reading activities. IREX equips librarians with the knowledge, skills, and tools necessary for facilitating reading activities that promote reading skills.

IREX is a leading library reform and modernization organization, having helped bring library systems into the 21st century in Ukraine, Romania, Moldova, Myanmar, Philippines, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Namibia,
BeyondAccess.net

Why community space matters for literacy

In many communities, families lack access to the resources they need to help children learn to read. In addition to textbooks, children need engaging supplementary reading materials like storybooks and games. They also need a comfortable, inviting space where they can use reading materials in an unstructured, informal way. Even the layout of typical classrooms — with desks in rows, facing forward — discourages sharing among students. But libraries can be arranged to encourage exploration and play.

A 21st-century library has a children’s corner with an array of books, games, toys, and child-sized furniture to provide stimulating activities for children. It has a friendly display of technology with signs providing guidance for usage; and the space has moveable screens and furniture to accommodate both quiet reading or study corners and group collaboration areas.

The role of technology in collaborative learning

With the right tools, parents and other family members — even those who cannot read themselves — can better engage in reading activities with children. Tablets and other devices loaded with leveled reading apps and games make reading practice more interactive and enjoyable.

Tablets in particular encourage collaboration and sharing. They can easily be passed around a reading circle or shared by a group of children. Children can move them from one room to another, or take them outside to show their parents what they are learning.

Coupled with well-designed community spaces and access to trained professional staff, technology tools can help make improved reading outcomes for children a reality. At the same time, these community spaces provide adults with information access, technology tools, and skills-building opportunities.

For more information and complete citations, please visit: beyondaccess.net
To increase literacy-rich environments outside the classroom

- Libraries are stocked with age-appropriate reading materials and technology tools for families to access and borrow
- Libraries provide a child-friendly, informal learning space where children participate in story time, play educational games, share with others, and create their own content

To increase community awareness of the importance of family reading activities

- Librarians conduct outreach activities to boost community awareness about the importance of home-based reading
- Librarians model and engage caregivers in joint-reading activities that they can continue at home
- Libraries offer communities locally relevant literacy programming and services that attract children and caretakers

To foster school-to-home and home-to-school literacy connections

- Librarians share reading materials and demonstrate non-traditional reading activities
- Teachers and librarians co-develop and lead public community literacy activities hosted at the library

To use low-cost ICT to involve community authors and illustrators to develop reading materials in local languages

- Applying its Hacking Literacy model, Beyond Access expands available early grade reading materials for young children through cost-effective technology application
Recent research has clarified both what causes illiteracy and what factors most contribute to developing literacy skills. Where do public libraries fit in the picture?

### Causes of illiteracy
1. Lack of trained teachers
2. Lack of reading materials
3. Lack of community support
4. Instructional time wasted
5. Lack of mother tongue instruction and materials

### What can public libraries do?
- Support early reading classes in schools with additional activities, guidance for teachers.
- Public storytimes and family reading activities for different ages and levels, space and guidance for caregivers to read with their children.
- Gather, circulate, loan and help community create relevant local materials at different levels.
- Keep library open hours convenient for children and families to visit. Make library comfortable and welcoming. Provide mobile services to those who can’t come to the library’s building.
- Serve as central institution fostering enjoyment around reading for everyone, conducting reading festivals and fairs, promoting value of reading.
- Host basic arts & crafts supplies like markers, crayons, paints to facilitate children’s creativity and connect it to books and stories with simple activities.
- Host interactive toys, including letter blocks, flash cards, puppets and dolls which give children opportunities to independently practice language skills and connect them to fun.

### What helps develop literacy skills?
- Being read to
- Going to the library
- Painting and drawing
- Being taught letters
- Singing or reciting songs/poems/rhymes

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