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Improving Literacy Through Community-Based Reading Programs: A Case Study of Rural Elementary Schools

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Abstract

Background:

The program sought to specifically tackle persisting literacy gaps in rural elementary schools where books, specialist support and instructional time are limited and inadequate to target school community participants' needs by implementing community-based reading program.

Methods:

A qualitative secondary case study was conducted on program evaluations, school reports, program implementation accounts and community literacy initiatives. Structured extraction, comparative coding and cross-case thematic synthesis were used to analyze the evidence.

Results:

Six themes emerged: access to print materials; practice supported by volunteers; participation of families; content of print materials (cultural relevance); practice of the teacher and community; and sustainability of practice implementation. Programs that ensured literacy activities were regular, developmentally sequenced, and aligned to classroom classes encouraged children to read more, increased their vocabulary, and improved their oral fluency, comprehension, confidence, and involvement with the school. Where volunteer preparation was not adequate, volunteer attendance was irregular, materials were not linguistically appropriate, or responsibilities were given to communities without institutional support, outcomes suffered.

Conclusion:

The study recommended a rural literacy partnership model comprising intertwined schools, families, trained community facilitators, local libraries, culturally attuned literacy books, ongoing monitoring and regular, sustained resources for equal literacy outcomes over time.

Keywords

Community Reading Programs; Rural Elementary Schools; Literacy Development; Family Engagement; Volunteer Tutoring; Reading Achievement

1. Introduction

The ability to read and write is the cornerstone for protection and access to schooling, for social interaction and communication, for transition into further education and for access to economic activities. In the elementary grades, children learn to decode words, improve fluency, comprehension, and use language in different content areas with confidence (Aisyah, 2024). Where these are not sufficiently developed, challenges build up, learners have to access the mathematics subject through reading, as do the science, social studies and more and more independent assignments. Factors such as fewer books, longer distances to travel, reduced specialist services, volatile staff, and time and resource-poor households make this a challenge for rural schools (Baker et al., 2012).

Community-based reading programs have become a pragmatic initiative in these circumstances. These programs involve classroom support for literacy, but then go beyond the classroom by means of a variety of activities such as volunteer tutoring, family literacy sessions, mobile libraries, village reading clubs, peer activities, community learning centers, local storytellers, and distribution of books (Bitantes & Estera). They are popular for their ability to elicit social relationships and local knowledge and for the increase in meaningful reading that can be offered to children. They also may facilitate a closer relationship between schools and communities because literacy is considered to be everyone's responsibility (Bitantes & Estera).

Community involvement, however, does not

necessarily result in good teaching. The volunteers are dedicated but do not have any depth in phonics, comprehension, child development, safeguarding and the inclusion of all (Caban et al., 2024). Families might appreciate education, but be less literate in the school language, due to a lack of time or good literature. Programs can offer books and not develop routines with them, or the attractive events could not be repeated (Caban et al., 2024). Seasonal labor, weather, transportation, migration and low connection between school and local organization can also lead to a lack of implementation in the rural area.

There is a difference between being present in the community and educational quality, therefore. While access needs to be expanded in successful programs, there is also a need to ensure that materials, activities, facilitation and feedback are geared towards the development of reading processes. Young readers need explicit assistance with sound-to-symbol relationships, repeated oral reading, vocabulary, meaning making and discussion. Older elementary children will require more complex books, backgrounds, inferences, writing and motivation (Chan & Chiu, 2024). Community provision should be adjunct to classroom lessons, not seen as a parallel system of provision with different expectations.

Not all rural communities are the same. Children have varying levels of language ability and disability, gender, income, distance to school, adult access, and achievement prior to receiving this education. Learners who live a long distance from school or who have circumstances at home may be excluded from the program offered after school (Cheung et al., 2021). Printed material can be culturally out of tune with the child and/or be in a language that is not familiar to the child. There is a potential for social hierarchy to be unintentionally reproduced in volunteer selection. The involvement of, and benefit for, participants must therefore always be a central consideration in effective community literacy work, as should be the barriers to participation. The present study aimed to analyze the changing trends in literacy in the rural elementary schools due to community-based reading programs using a qualitative secondary case study (French, 2014). There were four questions asked.

- **RQ1:** Which program components were added

that were most consistently linked with the literacy participation and achievement?

- **RQ2:** What was the interplay between community, school, family and other material conditions?
- **RQ3:** What were the implementation barriers that limited effectiveness/equity?
- **RQ4:** What structure would enable community-school collaboration in a way conducive to sustainability?

The study presented the case for community-based reading program as integrated systems of literacy. The elements of books, volunteers, family involvement, culturally relevant materials, teacher coordination, and monitoring were interdependent. Weak transfer occurred if there was no instructional guidance available. Having tutors without books limits involvement. Some families were not involved in family participation due to the lack of flexibility in structure. Shared governance, facilitation training, resources and ongoing adjustments were thus needed for sustainable improvement.

2. Conceptual and Rural Education Context

Community-based reading has been envisioned as structured literacy support beyond the confines of traditional school lessons that incorporates relationships and resources in the community. Activities may take place in the school, home, library, community centre, church and/or place of worship, mobile unit or outdoors venue. It was not simply “where” that was the defining characteristic, but the examples of community actors working collectively to promote children’s reading skills. A review was carried out from an ecological literacy perspective (Goodin, 2025). All children’s reading was mediated by a relationship between the skills of learners, classroom instructions, family rituals, friendships, language context, availability of reading materials, community expectations and institutional resources. The limitations in one area can curb the development in another. For instance, a child may get decoding instruction at school, which is explicit, but they may not be able to practice decoding with books that are readily available. In contrast, a home may foster reading, but not provide direction for comprehension

or choice of reading (Iroegbu & Igweike, 2020).

The development of reading was considered multi-dimensional. These processes were referred to as foundational processes: phonological awareness, decoding, letter knowledge and word recognition. Fluency related to accuracy, speed, intonation and self-assurance (Jones et al., 2023). Vocabulary, background knowledge, inference, monitoring and discussion were all part of the comprehension. The persistence of a child, along with their choice of texts and perceptions of the value of reading, was influenced by motivation. Instead, more than just encouragement was needed in community program: activities had to be designed in line with the literacy processes.

Rurality was considered as a context that was both a constraint and a capacity. Some of these barriers were: spread out populations, accessing transport, limited teacher resources, limited books, connectivity issues, and differential levels of access to specialist support. These capacities included having strong local relationships, theory of knowledge in multiple languages, oral traditions, shared space, intergenerational support and commitment from the community for children’s future. Deficient descriptions of rural communities were avoided these can lead to seeing what wasn’t done, and to passing on responsibility and withholding resources. Parental involvement was separated from parental compliance during the family engagement process (Jones et al., 2020). Families engaged by providing communication with facilitators, encouraging attendance at book events, providing home-language literacy, providing encouragement, providing communication and storytelling, and engaging in communication with facilitators. Incorporation of engagement structures required the consideration of varying levels of literacy, work/lifestyles, family types and languages (Jones & Li, 2021). An approach which involved parents teaching formal school techniques would unhelpfully limit parents with low levels of school education; an approach which encouraged parents to employ shared reading and storytelling orally would engage parents in their strengths.

In addition, the conceptual model distinguished between supplementation and substitution. Community program have been supplementary

when they provided practice, access, motivation and relational support in addition to teachers, who were responsible for curriculum and assessment. They were forced to become substitutes when volunteers were called to replace teachers who were not available to do more difficult work because of absence or lack of preparation. There needed to be clearly defined partnerships, communication, and accountability at the institutional level to ensure sustainability.

3. Methodology

The study is based on qualitative secondary case analysis. This design was chosen because community reading program were already evaluated, school reports have been generated, stories about implementation have been brought forth, monitoring summaries prepared and qualitative comments across rural settings have been provided. The use of reanalysis prevented a new primary data set from being created and statistical comparability from being forced upon the different interventions. A purposive evidence corpus was constructed that consisted of publicly available materials, describing community-based reading program for elementary-aged children in rural or remote schools. In cases of describing program, participant experience or reading outcomes, where materials were claimed, program materials were retained. There were a variety of eligible initiatives ranging from village clubs, peer reading, book distribution accompanied by a facilitator activity, volunteer tutoring, reading camps, family literacy, school–community partnerships, mobile libraries, and community learning centers. Materials were excluded unless they also included information on elementary reading achievement, unless they addressed just such issues as access to the technology, general attendance, or adult literacy. There were four stages of analysis. Program information was decomposed and put in a matrix first. This encompassed rural setting, learner age, language, location of the program, type of facilitator involved, focus of instruction, provision of materials, frequency of the program, duration of the program, role of the family, role of the teacher,

method of monitoring, outcome reported, and obstacles to implementation. Secondly, an open coding was carried out. Book shortage, re-reading, volunteer self-confidence, home-language support, attendance fluctuations, child choice, oral narration, understanding questioning, teacher referral, safeguarding, transport, seasonal disruption, and program continuity were all codes. Thirdly, codes were analyzed within and across cases. No assumption was made of similar activities being performed in an identical manner. Book distribution was ranked positive when books were leveled, there were reading routines, and the book was culturally appropriate, and ranked weak when books didn't get used or were too difficult. Bottom line: Volunteer tutoring methods were coded as “supportive” when facilitators used training and feedback and “risky” when volunteers were using “correction”, “memory” or “public comparison”. Diverse evidence has been kept to detect “boundary conditions”. Fourth, Themes were created in an iterative manner via groups and explanations. See six themes emerge: access to print, Volunteer-supported practice, family engagement, culturally and linguistically relevant materials, teacher–community coordination, and sustainability. The program themes were linked to a rural literacy partnership framework, spanning the range from inputs to developmental outcomes to conditions of governance. Quality safeguards were implemented, such as an audit trail from extracted evidence to themes, dealing with null and mixed findings, and separating reported program outcomes from any analytical interpretation. Materials could not be pooled since they provided different quality of measurements. The interpretation of the standardized scores, curriculum assessments, reading logs, attendance, observations, and participant accounts was done within the scope of their respective limitations. No private individuals were sought out, and no personal information was gathered. Thus, no ethical approval was needed. This review itself, however, took into account issues of safeguarding, accountability of volunteers, language inclusion, as well as the possible transference of statutory duties onto the community.

Table 1. Secondary case-study design, evidence boundaries, and analytical safeguards

Element	Specification	Analytical contribution
Research design	Qualitative secondary case analysis	Enabled cross-case interpretation of programme mechanisms without assuming statistical equivalence.
Evidence sources	Public programme evaluations, school reports, monitoring summaries, implementation narratives, and qualitative accounts	Captured both literacy outcomes and delivery conditions.
Population and setting	Elementary-aged children in rural, remote, village, or geographically dispersed schools	Included multilingual, low-resource, and mixed-access contexts.
Eligible programmes	Volunteer tutoring, reading clubs, family literacy, mobile libraries, community centres, peer reading, and facilitated book distribution	Required organized community participation and reported child literacy evidence.
Analytical process	Structured extraction, open coding, cross-case comparison, thematic synthesis, and framework development	Preserved positive, mixed, null, and conditional findings
Quality safeguards	Audit trail, disconfirming cases, cautious outcome interpretation, and separation of supplementation from substitution	Reduced overstatement and protected institutional accountability.

4. Findings

4.1 Access to books created an opportunity, but not automatic learning

The most frequent material constraint in rural cases was access to age-level appropriate books. Many school libraries were small and outdated, and some were shared among a large number of pupils, and many were locked. Through education, low ownership levels of children's books were also considered a common factor, especially children's books in local languages. Exposure was enhanced through community programs such as book boxes, mobile libraries, lending bags, reading corners and temporary reading camps.

Changes in access assisted reading frequency and choice by offering regular access to materials, and adults assisting in the choice of accessible books. The other social implication of the new 'visible, attractive' books is that they altered the social meaning of reading. Children talked about stories with their

peers, looked back on favorite stories and started to see reading as something that they did outside of reading lessons.

With distribution by itself, however, there resulted uneven results. Books which were too hard, too culturally different, too poorly translated, and not related to the advancement of the actual class led to frustration. To keep some materials, they had to be stored to prevent damage. Use was increased by the establishment of lending routines and replacement procedures with program, as well as through reading demonstrations and shared responsibility for care (Jones et al., 2025).

The evidence was thus that access was through the means of usability. While quantity was important, and was the sole determinant in whether books became learning resources, other factors included developmental level, language, relevance, visibility and circulation, respectively.

4.2 Trained volunteers expanded practice and

relational support

Community volunteers to add adults to listen to children read, model fluency, ask questions, and support perseverance. Program to be continued outside school times and travel were minimized due to their local presence. Some of the adults involved in the process were familiar, and there were some safer areas for struggling readers who didn't always like to read in front of the class.

Preparation was key to volunteer effectiveness. Better use of prompts, praise, turn-taking, and comprehension questions was supported with short and practical training. Facilitators appreciated easy-going lessons, demonstrations, guides readily available, and the time to have discussions with teachers and/or coordinators, in case of challenges. Coaching was more useful than initial orientation as the volunteers desired feedback after facing authentic students (Lee & Szczerbinski, 2021).

The risk was due to weak preparation. Several Volunteers focused on efficient speed, content memorization, and/or error correction without understanding. Openly comparing young readers' progress may cause embarrassment for those who are having difficulty. Others chose activities according to their personal preference and not according to the learner's needs. Program with well-defined referral systems were more likely to identify children who needed specialist or teacher support.

But the motivation of the volunteers was important too. They stayed involved because of recognition, support to get to school, materials, certificates, peer meetings, and visible results of learners' progress. To rely on unpaid labor, not appreciating that it was impractical, resulted in turnover. There appeared to be the greatest commitment from the community if volunteers were not considered to be second best for the missing teachers.

4.3 Family engagement strengthened continuity when participation was flexible

The practice of literacy was carried out in everyday life with family involvement. The concept of the importance of reading was reinforced through shared reading, storytelling, conversation, word games and encouragement. For language support and interest, the Caregivers were not required to be formally

trained as teachers. Among the few studies that used adults with little education, program showing simple practices reduced anxiety.

It was important to have flexible engagement. Rural families worked as farmers, in the fields in certain seasons, performed care duties and travelled. Some households were excluded from the fixed meetings. Program increased participation with a range of strategies such as rotating times, home lending, short aisles after community events, audio cues, participation of siblings, and home-language activities (Lee & Szczerbinski, 2021).

Strong family literacy was found when families' knowledge was respected by facilitators. Storytelling or actively told oral texts, proverbs, songs and local history were the ways into reading and discussion. Strategies which regarded non-school literacy practices as deficiencies proved to erode trust.

Every house didn't offer steady assistance. For some children, family members were older relatives, had a seasonal rotation of living, or there was no confident reader in the family. Program where equity was not impacted: Community sessions were still offered, and family involvement was encouraged, but not required for support.

4.4 Cultural and linguistic relevance supported comprehension and identity

Children were more involved with reading texts which had familiar settings, names, livelihoods, languages and social experiences. The familiar content minimized unnecessary comprehension obstacles and allowed for richer discussion as students were able to tie in the stories and make connections with previous knowledge.

During early reading development, by and large, it was home-language materials that had their greatest significance. Children could be given an opportunity to concentrate on decoding and meaning without learning unfamiliar vocabulary and grammar. In bilingual teaching, continuity was promoted by bilingual materials and by oral explanation when teaching shifted to a dominant school language (Markovitz et al., 2022).

Local experience was not the sole means of attaining cultural relevance. Program which had a predominance of familiar textbooks with a range of

opportunities to experience wider worlds performed best. The order made a difference – recognition led to confidence and background knowledge, and a range of texts that led to imagination. The lack of adaptation of materials presented difficulties. There were some unnatural translations of direct quotes, and occasionally, illustrations were not representative of local life in the direct translations. The quality was improved with community review, teacher input and reading pilots. Ownership has also been boosted with locally produced stories, but still requires editorial and development standards. Representation affected identity. Dignifying rural life and making it a subject other than a problem to be escaped from, encouraged children to talk about characters and aspirations. Reading was associated with an understanding of oneself and skills acquisition.

4.5 Teacher–community coordination improved instructional coherence
Ideal program kept in touch with teachers regularly. Priority skills identified and learner referred, classroom methods explained and interpretation of progress. Community facilitators shared to present

the information on attendance, confidence, reading behavior and these less visible barriers in lessons. There were no conflicting approaches, as coordination was achieved. Schools that systematically taught decoding and volunteers that “guessed” using pictures influenced their children with an inconsistent message. Consistent routines, language and progression enhanced transfer to the program in the classroom (Morris, 2023). Additionally, the teachers helped provide for community sessions to supplement, not replace, instruction. Volunteers might repeat a lesson to the class, listen to them, talk to them and give them encouragement. The teachers would keep diagnosis, curriculum planning and formal assessment. Leadership in schools had an impact on legitimacy. Where Headteachers had recruited volunteers, provided space and time, organized a monitoring system for safeguarding and recognized the contributions of the community, partnerships were stronger. Program that were administered as ‘projects’ outside of the leadership meant integration was of a superficial nature.

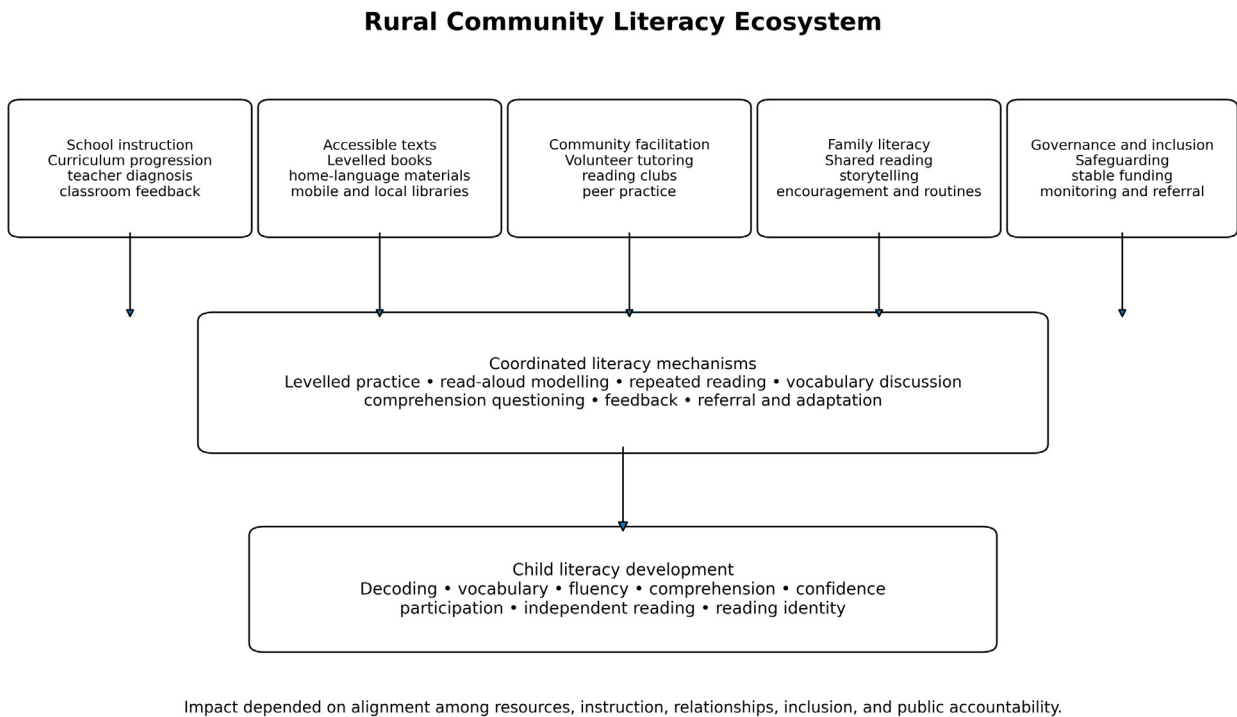


Figure 1. Rural community literacy ecosystem linking school, family, community, material, and governance conditions

4.6 Regular dosage and formative monitoring supported progress

Repeated participation over an adequate period was correlated with literacy gains. Short festivals and “reading days” led to increased visibility and can have an impact on achievement if there is follow-up. Program with more successful outcomes typically had multiple sessions per week or had ongoing sessions throughout the term or school year, and were ongoing, lending and guided practice sessions. Attendance at times fluctuated due to weather conditions, agricultural season, sickness, travel, duties around own farms and community activities. Grammar and spelling losses were minimized by offering flexible catch-up opportunities. Program also gained from the flexibility of session times agreed locally and responding to variations in children’s travel requirements after the school day (Rodriguez-Oramas et al., 2022).

Facilitators used formative monitoring to assure fit of supports to needs. Some of the tools employed were short word reading tasks, timed reading passages for oral reading fluency, reading comprehension conversations, reading logs, and observations of strategy use. Monitoring was having the greatest impact when it led to intervention, but was not just giving data to funders.

The results of over testing resulted in a decreased reading time and may have frightened children. Basic, repetitive actions, teacher input and learner discussion brought adequate guidance. Differentiation of transfer to new texts had to be made in program.

4.7 Literacy, confidence, and participation developed together

Positive results were reported beyond just the test scores. Children displayed increased enthusiasm and confidence for reading in class, read more, volunteered to read to the class, discussed the stories they were reading, and borrowed books. Such changes were important as only through ongoing engagement would the process of literacy development be supported.

The foundational outcomes highlighted were around knowledge of letters, word recognition, vocabulary, oral fluency and comprehension. Progress was more uniform where work was focused on skills, with texts

at the right level. General reading clubs helped to maintain the motivation, but did not provide the strongest evidence of skill change, with the same level of lack of structure in instruction.

Supportive relationships were often a factor in developing confidence. Insufficient patience and immediate encouragement that overcrowded classrooms made difficult were not available from volunteers. Small group practice led to a decrease in the fear of mistakes. For some pupils, however, their confidence was dented by the public performance and comparison.

Not all the program effects were general. Sometimes the poorest-engaged children needed the most explicit and intensive support than was provided at the general community sessions. Learners who had hearing/visual/language and/or cognitive needs benefited from accessible materials and activities. Equity thus demanded differentiation and referral, and not provision that was the same for each child.

4.8 Sustainability depended on governance and stable resources

Many program started off with a good level of enthusiasm, but dropped out after initial provisions of funding, donated books or external coordination were ended. Local ownership was essential for sustainability, but it was not enough. Community needs included reliable resources, facilitator training, a protective framework, lost books, and institutional respect.

There was better continuity with shared governance. Committees consisting of teachers, families, volunteers, local leaders and program staff could be responsible for scheduling, problem-solving, participation monitoring and planning resources. To achieve clear roles, less reliance on one person.

It was critical to be financially realistic. This cost, even in volunteer-led program, involved transport, printing, storage, training, supervision, lighting and printing of new books. Program often were described as low-cost, but included unpaid work, or diverting work to women or already engaged community members.

Stronger capacity to work with partnerships with libraries, local governments, civil society, teacher education institutions and publishers. The most

effective rallying of support for rural program occurred when they were linked to school improvement plans and Public literacy strategies, as opposed to being one-off projects.

Table 2. Cross-case themes, enabling conditions, and principal implementation risks

Programme domain	Observed contribution	Enabling conditions	Principal risks
Access to print	More books, borrowing, reading choice, and a visible reading culture	Level, language, relevance, circulation, and adult guidance	Book counts without use; inaccessible or protected materials
Volunteer tutoring	Additional practice, patient listening, encouragement, and local continuity	Practical training, coaching, clear roles, safeguarding, and teacher referral	Correction-heavy instruction, turnover, unpaid burden, and substitution for teachers
Family engagement	Home continuity, storytelling, encouragement, and language interaction	Flexible timing, simple demonstrations, sibling involvement, and respect for local literacy	Participation requirements that exclude busy or low-literacy households
Cultural and linguistic relevance	Improved comprehension, discussion, identity, and confidence	Natural language, local review, familiar contexts, bilingual progression	Poor translation, stereotypes, or restricting children to local experience
Teacher coordination	Instructional alignment, referrals, shared progress information, and transfer	Designated coordinator, common routines, simple reporting	Parallel systems and dependence on one individual
Dosage and monitoring	Regular reading, targeted skill practice, and timely adaptation	Locally agreed schedules, brief formative checks, and catch-up opportunities	Irregular attendance, overtesting, practised-text gains without transfer
Sustainability	Long-term access, stable relationships, and programme continuity	Shared governance, public funding, partnerships, replacement plans	Short grants, hidden costs, volunteer exhaustion, temporary projects

5. Discussion

The case synthesis revealed that community-based reading program focused on building meaningful practice in an integrated educational system contributed to enhanced rural literacy. Results were best when more than one element was used. One reinforced the other: books, volunteers, families, relevant language, teacher coordination and monitoring. Taking anything out compromised the

participation in the achievement story.

Without access, it is not enough! The only books that were used for instruction were the ones that were readable, relevant, circulated and discussed. This discovery disputed donation-based practices and models which measured materials but not use. It also emphasized local language publications and the sequence of development (Simmons, 2022).

Both instructional time and relational support were provided by community volunteers. Their help was

very useful in overcrowded schools, and for children who required extra repetition. But one should not be idealistic about volunteerism. There was a need for training, coaching, safeguarding, and realistic support for facilitation to be effective. When unpaid labor was substituted for the lack of public investment, program were at risk of being inequitable.

Engaging families involved encouraging, interacting with language and continuity, not just formal teaching. Local livelihoods and life structures were respected through flexible approaches. This finding validated the strengths-based approach, which portrayed oral traditions and local knowledge as literacy resources. The main integration condition that was found is the coordination between teachers. The absence of it makes it possible to have community activities that would be motivational but not connected to the curriculum. Program were able to extend practice, identify any barriers, and ensure that they were building on the progression of instruction. For this, formal time and responsibility for coordination were needed (Stauss et al., 2021).

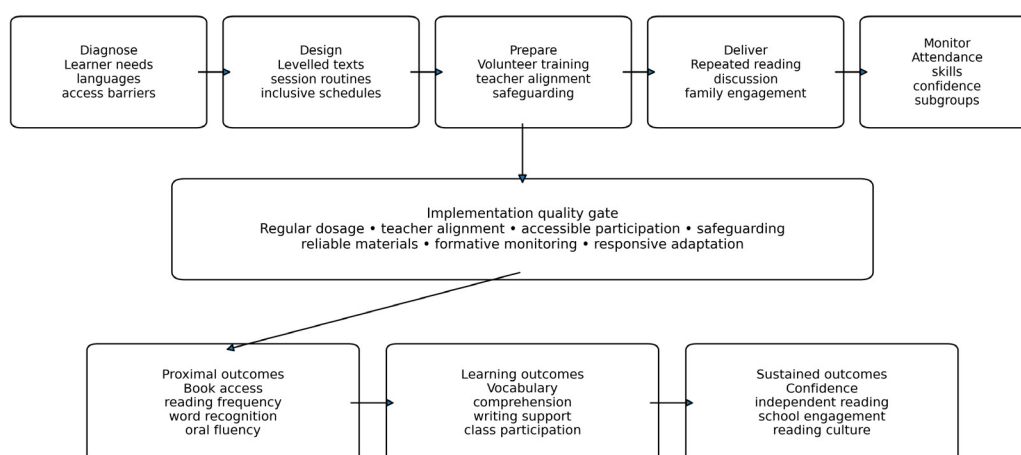
The results also indicated that literacy outcomes were skill, identity and participation. The following learning frequency and enhanced confidence were not add-on benefits; they facilitated ongoing learning. However, positive engagement does not represent a form of attainment if it is not appropriately assessed.

Differentiated support was needed to meet equity needs. Children with severe difficulties, disabilities, language transitions or poor attendance levels required different materials and higher-level intervention – this was provided by the universal reading clubs, but as an optional element. Community program need to have referral links and should not necessarily address all needs (Stauss et al., 2021).

The promoted rural literacy partnership model was a 5-level framework. There was a resources layer to include accessible books, spaces and resources. Structured practice and feedback on formative were integrated into the layer of the instruction. The relational layer comprises volunteers, families, peers and teachers. The inclusion layer included a focus on language, disability, distance and schedule. Coordination, safeguarding, funding and evaluation were delivered by the governance layer (Wijaya et al., 2022).

This frame puts community participation in a different light: a co-production with public institutions. Communities provided their expertise, networks and local resources, and education authorities were responsible for teacher quality, curriculum, fair access to resources, and specialist provision. Sustainable improvement of literacy could not be achieved through a retreat of the role of institutions, but by the reciprocal partnership (Wijaya et al., 2022).

Community Reading Programme Implementation and Outcome Pathway



Continuous review adapted materials, dosage, support, and participation when evidence showed unequal access or weak transfer.

Figure 2. Implementation and outcome pathway for sustainable community-based rural reading programmes

6. Rural Literacy Partnership Framework and Implications

Seven actions were identified to develop a framework of practice. Before choosing activities, programmes must first assess the following: local literacy needs; languages spoken; accessible modes of transport; local resources; and barriers. Teachers' assessment should be used in conjunction with community consultation.

Secondly, the materials need to be developmentally appropriate, linguistically appropriate, culturally appropriate, and culturally diverse. Lending processes, storage, replacement and circulation should be thought out right from the start.

Thirdly, volunteers should be trained for their role. Read-aloud modelling, decoding prompt, fluency exercises, vocabulary, comprehension questioning, inclusion, safeguarding, and referral should be core content. The coaching should be done after initial preparation.

Fourthly, there is a need to formalize teacher–community coordinating. With a simple, easily kept record of progress and a designated literacy coordinator, the scheduled meetings could keep alignment without unnecessary bureaucracy.

Fifthly, there should be flexibility and inclusiveness in participation. Seasonal work, transport, safety, disability and household responsibilities should be taken into consideration when arranging programme schedules. Multiple sites, make-up sessions, and home language options should be used.

Sixth, there is a need to balance monitoring for improvement with burden. Attendance, access, how often students read, skills targeted, comprehension, and confidence of the students should be recorded in

programmes, and groups should be identified where students are participating. Using data to inform change, not culpability or punishment, for volunteers or children.

Seventh, it's time to finance sustainability. The costs for books, training, supervision, storage, transport, accessibility, and renewal can be factored in by public agencies and partners. These commitments should be coupled with community contributions that supplement, as opposed to replace.

School Leaders: Framework proposes using community programmes as features of literacy planning, safeguarding and teacher development. For policy-makers, it recommended funding formulas that accounted for small school size, language diversity, lack of adequate library facilities and distance while funding for rural schools. It highlighted theories of change that are transparent to programme organizations and cost reporting that is realistic.

Shared use of community libraries/reading centres for children, families and educators. Where the communities were scattered, mobile services were important and needed regular availability and maintenance. Reading materials locally produced with language quality and reading development monitored could serve the purpose of relevance (while consistency of presentation, grammatical, linguistic, and reading progression would be reviewed).

Even if power and internet were available, digital resources would be welcomed in addition to print; however, technology should not be taken as a panacea for a lack of resources. Devices needed to be maintained, charged, trained and have proper content. The print-based extended reading for flexible lending and shared reading was necessary in many rural settings.

Table 3. Implementation roadmap for equitable and sustainable rural literacy partnerships

Stage	Required action	Monitoring evidence
1. Diagnose	Map languages, baseline literacy, travel, disability, seasonal schedules, and existing community resources	Needs profile; participation risks; school–community agreement
2. Curate materials	Select levelled, culturally credible, linguistically appropriate, and diverse texts	Book-use audit; lending rate; learner choice; accessibility review

3. Prepare facilitators	Train volunteers in decoding prompts, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, inclusion, safeguarding, and referral	Observed practice, coaching records, volunteer confidence and retention
4. Coordinate instruction	Align community sessions with classroom progression and teacher assessment	Shared routines; referral completion; teacher–facilitator communication
5. Deliver flexibly	Use repeated small-group practice, family options, catch-up sessions, and safe local venues	Attendance, dosage, subgroup participation, schedule fit
6. Monitor development	Track reading frequency, targeted skills, comprehension, confidence, and classroom participation	Multiple evidence sources; transfer to unfamiliar texts
7. Govern equitably	Share decisions while maintaining public responsibility, safeguarding, and specialist support	Role clarity, incident procedures, inclusion and referral audit
8. Sustain resources	Budget for books, replacement, storage, training, supervision, transport, and accessibility	Full cost model; renewal plan; partner commitments

7. Limitations and Future Research

This study was a synthesis that did not estimate a pooled effect and that primarily used secondary, heterogeneous evidence. The quality of designs of the programmes, rural contexts, languages, measures and reporting varied. The overall conclusions indicated mechanisms, conditions and limits of the effect of a programme, while no single ‘programme effect’ was observed.

There may be an overfocus on successful cases, and there were fewer cases that were dropped or children who ceased to attend in public reports. Several of the outcomes were based on reading logs or on perceptions from participants. Claims of achievement were therefore taken with a grain of scepticism.

The case-study framing introduced various programmes in the rural areas; however, the representation of rurality varied between regions. Other communities, in the remote mountain areas and in agricultural villages living there, in indigenous communities and in sparsely populated districts, experienced different situations. Local adjustments continued to be needed.

Future studies would benefit from investigating programme components over time and using mixed-method designs. Research should focus on cost,

retention of volunteers, family involvement, inclusion of people with disabilities, progression in multiple languages and transition to classroom success. There is a need for increased focus on children with the poorest starting abilities and communities with adult literacy issues.

Studies should further explore the effect of community programmes on the skills of teachers and the resources of schools. One of the variables that might affect the impact of strong community support is systematic or inconsistent classroom instruction. Children, families, volunteers and teachers could contribute ideas of meaningful outcomes to participatory research.

8. Conclusion

Community-based reading programmes presented a plausible option to increase the likelihood of literacy in rural elementary schools for community education partners - yet hinged on the quality of the education and the commitment of the community partners. The use of a combination of books, volunteers, families, relevant language, teacher coordination, monitoring, and stable resources worked together.

The secondary case analysis revealed programmes which supported reading frequency, foundational skills, fluency, comprehension, confidence and school involvement in the context of regular practice,

structure, inclusivity, and making programmes complement classroom activities. Outcomes suffered in cases where supplies were inadequate, volunteer involvement was low, attendance was not consistent, and/or there was an avoidance of public responsibility and a reliance on local citizen involvement.

The community-led system of rural literacy partnerships meant that the communities were not only engaged as active partners in the production but also kept communities accountable. In order to achieve sustainable improvement, trained facilitators, accessible texts, flexible participation, safeguarding, referral, reliable funding and shared governance were needed.

The development of literacy was more robust when it was a supported social practice, rather than as an isolated school task. Programme methodologies which linked classrooms, homes, local stories, public spaces and local resources – and, ultimately, people to books – were better suited to enhancing the achievement and culture of reading in rural areas.

Declarations

Authors' Contributions

Renel Trinidad

Renel Trinidad conceived the study, developed the research framework, formulated the research questions, designed the qualitative secondary case study methodology, supervised the analytical process, interpreted the findings, synthesized the evidence into the proposed rural literacy partnership framework, drafted the original manuscript, and approved the final version for publication.

Hitoshi Tendo

Hitoshi Tendo conducted the evidence collection and organization, performed structured data extraction, comparative coding, and thematic analysis, verified the analytical findings, prepared the tables and figures, critically reviewed and revised the manuscript for important intellectual content, managed reference verification and formatting, and approved the final manuscript for publication.

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Competing interests:

The author declares no competing interests influencing the study design, analysis, interpretation, or reported conclusions.

Ethics approval:

Not applicable because the study analyzed publicly available, non-identifiable secondary evidence.

Data availability:

No primary dataset was generated; the analytical synthesis and framework are reported within the manuscript.

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