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To cite this article: Benta A. Abuya, Moses Oketch, Moses W. Ngware, Maurice Mutisya & Peter K. Musyoka (2015) Experiences of parents with the Reading to Learn approach: a randomised control trial initiative to improve literacy and numeracy in Kenya and Uganda, Education 3-13, 43:5, 514-529, DOI: 10.1080/03004279.2013.829859

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2013.829859

Published online: 25 Aug 2013.
Experiences of parents with the Reading to Learn approach: a randomised control trial initiative to improve literacy and numeracy in Kenya and Uganda

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(Received 22 January 2013; final version received 22 July 2013)

Parental involvement in their children’s schooling is in recognition that establishing the context in which a child attends school is important. Reading to Learn (RtL) was implemented in two districts of Kwale and Kinango in Kenya and of Amolatar and Dokolo in Uganda. This paper looks at parental involvement and their experiences with RtL. Data are obtained from survey responses at baseline and focus group discussions with parents at endline. Findings indicate that parents are key actors in literacy and numeracy of their children. The study underscores the role of parents and context in literacy activities and policy implementation.

Keywords: literacy; numeracy; parents; experiences; Reading to Learn

Introduction

Parental involvement and schooling

The need to involve parents in their children schooling is in recognition that establishing the context in which a child attends school is important, and that there are various ways of parental involvement with schools (Hill and Taylor 2004). Scholars generally agree that parental involvement consists of the following characteristics: communication with teachers and other school personnel; offering assistance to their children with academic activities at home; volunteering time at school; attending school events; parent–teacher association meetings; and parent–teacher conferences (Hill and Taylor 2004).

Research shows that higher levels of parental involvement with the learning of their children has a positive impact with the child’s school performance (Fan and Chen 2001; Hill and Taylor 2004; Miedel and Reynolds 1999), and this is true for primary and secondary schools (Feinstein and Symons 1999), and leads to improved academic achievement, superior cognitive competency, improved skills in problem solving, improved school attendance, better school enjoyment and few behaviour problems in school (Melhuish et al. 2001). Moreover, research documents that for young children in early grades, involving parents in their schooling is associated with being successful early in school, which

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includes academic success, language skills and social competence (Hill 2001; Hill and Craft 2003), as well as attentiveness in class (Rowe 1991).

**Importance of involving parents in their children’s literacy development**

Parental involvement in early reading of their children is beneficial to the preparation of children for the formal literacy instruction. In particular, children whose parents are engaged with their early reading develop language comprehension (Gest et al. 2004) and emergent literacy skills (Bus, van Ijzendoorn, and Pellegrini 1995; Sonnenschein and Munsterman 2002). However, this is dependent on the quality of the interactive sessions for enhancing the interest of children in literacy (Rowe 1991; Sonnenschein and Munsterman 2002). Most importantly, babies who are introduced to books by their parents have a head start in school and are advantaged over their peers throughout their primary school years (Wade and Moore 2000).

In addition, proponents of parental–school connection argue that the impact of parents involvement and support for their children’s literacy activities is greater than other background characteristics such as parental education, size of the families and social class (Flouri and Buchanan 2004). Enjoying reading predicts children’s educational success more than socio-economic status of their respective families (OECD 2002). Moreover, the earlier the parents get involved in the literacy practices of their children, the greater the impact and the longer the effects last (Mullis et al. 2004). This notwithstanding, research continues to show that unlike other subjects, reading is more sensitive to parental influences (Senechal and LeFevre 2002), and success in reading, opens up greater success in other academic areas (Jordan, Snow, and Porsche 2000).

**In what ways does parental involvement make a difference?**

Two mechanisms exist that link parental involvement and student’s achievement. The first is that parental involvement increases social capital (Hill and Taylor 2004; Putnam 2000). In particular, parental skills and information are increased through enhanced parental and school interaction, which in turn makes parents better placed to offer assistance to their children in school-related activities (Hill and Taylor 2004). As parents relate with the school personnel, they get informed about the school’s expectation of students, in terms of behaviour and homework; and how to assist their children with homework and enhance children’s learning at home (Lareau 1996). Involved parents will get avenues to meet other parents who will add to their knowledge of school policies, practices and extra-curricular activities (Hill and Taylor 2004). Moreover, parents who are involved in their children’s learning get to know three important aspects of their children’s learning: teachers who are good; difficult situations that exist and how they have been managed; and the parental expectations of their children’s teachers (Hill and Taylor 2004). Other scholars argue that involved parents develop multifaceted strategies for working with children and the schools that they attend to promote their achievement (Stevenson and Baker 1987).

The second mechanism through which parental involvement affects student’s learning is through social control (Hill and Taylor 2004). This refers to the building of consensus by families and schools about the appropriate behaviour that can be effectively communicated to children, both at school and at home (McNeal 1999). In addition, when parents know each other and develop a consensus on goals – both academic and behavioural – it serves as inhibiting factors against problem behaviours. When similar messages are received by children and their peers about how to behave appropriately, from different
sources, across different settings, the messages become apparent and relevant, reducing confusion about what is expected of them. Moreover, when families are not in agreement with each other or with the schools about what behaviour is appropriate for their children, teachers cannot teach effectively. Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994) sum it all up when they argue that messages received by children, through social capital and social control, about the importance of schooling, increases the competence, motivation to learn and engagement in school for children. From the foregoing discussion, it is clear that the involvement of parents in children’s reading and achievement is very important (Hill 2001; Hill and Craft 2003; Hill and Taylor 2004). This study sought to establish: the parental views at the onset of the Reading to Learn (RtL) intervention and establish a qualitative assessment of ways in which parents were involved in the education of their children in the early grades with respect to RtL approach.

Context and setting of the study
Within East Africa, Kenya and Uganda are regarded as countries that have valued education investment. Uganda implemented policy for universal access in 1996 but the outcome has shown rapidly deteriorating quality (Uganda MOES 2005; Nishimura, Yamano, and Sasaoka 2008). Kenya followed in 2003 and its success has been captured in the film ‘First Grader’ which symbolises the enthusiasm with which the universal access policy was accepted. However, like Uganda confidence has been eroded rapidly due to the declining quality, both perceived and real (World Bank 2008). Some of the evidence presented to support the issue of low quality is the rise of private schooling, even among the poor (Mwalimu 2010; Oketch, Ngware, et al. 2010; Tooley, Dixon, and Stanfield 2008). One need not be convinced that if quality in public schools was acceptable, the utilisation of private schooling would not be on the rise as has been the case since the operation of universal access policies in both countries (Oketch, Mutisya, et al. 2010). In search of a solution, Aga Khan Foundation (AKF) which has worked in East Africa for several decades embarked on a programme to improve quality of learning in early grades by implementing the project, the East African Quality in Early Learning (EAQEL) which aimed to address issues of low literacy and numeracy of children in grades 1–3. The intervention was implemented in two districts, Kwale and Kinango in Kenya and the districts Amolatar and Dokolo in Uganda. RtL initiative was implemented over a period of 16 months, and tested an instructional approach based on David Rose’s scaffolding model (RtL) (Oketch, Ngware, et al. 2010). AKF realised that parental involvement was a critical factor to improve learning in early grades. Thus, literacy in the home was encouraged by establishing mini-libraries and encouraging parents to borrow books, read and tell stories to their children – called as the ‘Core Model Plus’. The impact of RtL on numeracy and literacy in early grades was assessed using a randomised controlled trial (RCT) design. In built in this RCT was the qualitative component, where data were collected using focus group discussions (FGDs). This paper presents data from parental views at baseline and from FGD at endline to explain parental experiences with RtL intervention. The immediate section below describes the RtL intervention and the selected districts where the core model plus was implemented.

The RtL intervention
The project design included three components: teacher preparedness and practice, school leadership and classroom learning environments. These components were embedded into
two separate but mutually inclusive modules – the ‘core model’ and ‘core model plus’. The core model involved teachers of early grade learners being trained on the RtL approach which is child-centred, systematic and focuses on social interaction. In addition, schools were supported to improve teachers’ and pupils’ access to and use of appropriate teaching and learning materials. AKF project staff worked with head teachers, key teachers and district education staff from decentralised teacher support resource institutions to train teachers and provide in-class mentoring support. The core model plus encompassed all the aspects of the core model and had a parental involvement component.

Selection of study districts in Kenya and Uganda

The RtL parental component was implemented in Kinango district in Kenya and Amolatar district in Uganda. Prior to 2007, both Kwale and Kinango districts were part and parcel of a larger administrative Kwale district in the Coast Province of Kenya. In 2007, the larger Kwale district was split into two to form the current Kwale and Kinango districts. According to the 2009 population census, the population size in Kinango and Kwale districts was 209,560 and 151,978, respectively. Kinango and Kwale together were the worst performing districts in the country in 2007 end of primary examinations. Among the challenges in Kinango district is low community participation among parents in their children’s education due to poor attitudes towards education. There was also the misconception that with the inception of free primary education programme parents have no responsibilities for their children’s education (Oketch et al. 2012).

In Uganda, RtL was implemented in Amolatar and Dokolo, two districts in the northern region of Uganda which for about 20 years has extensive warfare due to the disgraced Lord’s Resistance Army of Kony. With the end of the civil war, there have been efforts by the government and international agencies to provide a good education – AKF has been active in this regard. This was a response to low literacy rates in Uganda which were at 45.5% at Primary Grade 3 and 49.6% at Primary Grade 6. This meant that students in grade 6 were only four percentage points more likely to be literate. In addition, numeracy competencies were rated at 44.8% at Primary Grade 3 and 41.4% at Primary Grade 6 (NAPE 2007).

Methods

Participant recruitment and sampling

This paper situated the parental interviews and FGDs in the overall context of the RCT. The focus of this paper is on the qualitative component of the RCT, using data from parental interviews and FGDs. Parental interviews were conducted at baseline and it targeted a total of 7260 households. However, 5611 households were interviewed. The FGDs were conducted at the endline and an initial sample of 180 parents was targeted. A total of 107 parents participated in the actual FGDs. In order to get to the targeted sample of parents, a random selection 10% of the schools in the core model plus was picked in districts of Kinango in Kenya and Amolatar in Uganda. The selected schools were assigned to invite either males or females parents/guardians to participate in the FGDs. To get to the targeted sample of parents, 15 pupils in each of the sampled schools were randomly selected and provided with letters inviting their parents to participate in the FGD, on a specific date. Details in the letter sent to the parents included the venue of the FGD, time and whether it was the father or the mother who was invited for the discussion.
Data collection

At the baseline, household data were collected from parents or guardians of the sampled pupils in the Core model plus districts – Kinango in Kenya and Amolatar in Uganda. This household data were collected using the household amenities tool that sought to find answers to the following questions: if parents told stories to their children; parental visits to their children’s schools; whether the parents read books with their children at home; whether the child came home with homework from school; whether the respondents helped the child with homework; and whether other members of the household helped the child with homework. At the endline, data were collected using FGDs. In total, 12 FGDs were conducted, five in Amolatar (three treatments and two controls) and seven in Kinango (four treatments and three controls). The FGDs were conducted in both Kenya and Uganda between June and July 2011. The FGDs were conducted in Kiswahili in Kinango, Kenya and in Lang’i in Amolatar in Uganda. An FGD guide was used to gather information from the parents (see Table 1). On average, there were nine participants in the FGDs. This method is one that focuses on group interaction as the source of data and the active role of the researcher as a facilitator of the group discussion. The transcripts were translated into English after verbatim transcription. The FGDs lasted between 45 minutes and two hours. Each FGD was tape-recorded to ensure that all the data were captured. The FGDs were conducted separately for men and women, except, in one school in Kenya where both male and female parents participated in the same FGD. Data collection was approved by the ethical review board at Kenya Medical Research Institute in Kenya and the Ministry of Education in Uganda.

Method of analysis

Data from the household survey at baseline were analysed using the descriptive statistics. This was to show the percentages of parents (respondents) who participated in the various activities that characterised parental involvement. In addition, parental narratives from the FGDs were thematically analysed. We generated codes from the concepts that emerged from the research question that guided the study. We identified codes from reading the first set of transcripts. This set of codes was discussed and agreed on by the lead qualitative researcher and one other qualitative researcher at the Centre who was involved in the study. The coding process entailed identifying a vital moment in the data and attaching importance

Table 1. The FGD protocol.

1. What are your experiences with this intervention (RtL)?
2. (a) What has been your involvement and interaction with your children and the school during the implementation of this intervention?
3. (a) What were some of the materials that were at your disposal during the implementation process? (Did AKF provide you with any materials for your children?)
   (b) Were you involved in the development of these materials? Please describe the process
4. Were you involved in the development of these materials? Please describe the process
5. What were some of the challenges that you encountered during the implementation of the intervention?
6. In your opinion, what could have been done differently to alleviate some of these challenges that you faced in the implementation process?
7. What were the general benefits of the RtL to the general community beyond the school and the home?
8. Would you recommend the intervention to continue or not?
to it before beginning the process of interpretation (Fereday and Mur-Cochrane 2006). Moreover, other codes were generated from issues that emerged from the data identified by parents as those associated with the RtL intervention. The codes were categorised into themes – giving way to thematic analysis. Thematic analysis involves identifying broad categories from a set of codes through reading of the data on the transcripts (Rice and Ezzy 1999).

Results

Parental views at baseline

Table 2 shows that a higher proportion of parents and/or guardians who were interviewed at baseline in Uganda told stories to their children at home. For instance, 77.2% told stories to their children in Uganda compared to 43.6% in Kenya. In addition, 62.9% of parents in Kenya visited the schools where their children attended to consult with teachers. This was 13 percentage points higher than the proportion of parents who visited schools in Uganda. In terms of reading books, higher proportions of parents in both countries, did not read books to their children, with 78.2% and 82.8% in Kenya and Uganda, respectively. Therefore, a higher proportion of parents (21.8%) in Kenya read books with their children.

Help with homework

Table 3 presents percentages of children who came home with homework, those children who were helped with homework by the respondent or other significant member in the household. In Kenya, slightly over half of the children came home from school with homework with a proportion of 59.9%. In Uganda, 77.8% did not come home with homework, with only 22.2% coming home from school with homework. Out of the children who came home with homework, a higher proportion of them were always assisted by their parents to complete homework tasks in Uganda, with a proportion of 53.5%. Similar proportions of children were assisted sometimes with homework across the two countries with proportions of 27.9% and 26.7% for Kenya and Uganda, respectively. In Kenya, 53.8% of the school going children were not assisted at all with homework. In addition, other respondents in the households could also assist the children with homework at home. In this regard, 41.5% of the children in Uganda were always assisted to complete their homework by other household members, other than their parents. In Kenya, 41% of the children were assisted at certain times with their homework. There were no major differences in the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Kenya</th>
<th></th>
<th>Uganda</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell stories</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>1835</td>
<td>56.44</td>
<td>355</td>
<td>22.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1416</td>
<td>43.56</td>
<td>1204</td>
<td>77.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visit school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>1205</td>
<td>37.07</td>
<td>794</td>
<td>50.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2046</td>
<td>62.93</td>
<td>765</td>
<td>49.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading books</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>2542</td>
<td>78.19</td>
<td>1291</td>
<td>82.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>709</td>
<td>21.81</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>17.19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
proportions of children who were not assisted with home in both countries, standing at 31.1% and 34.8% in Kenya and Uganda, respectively.

Parental narratives from FGDs

**Background characteristics of FGDs**

A higher proportion of FGD participants were females with proportions of 82.8% and 53.5% in Kenya and Uganda, respectively. Majority of the respondents were aged 29–38 years. For example, 50% of the respondents aged 29–38 years were from Kenya, while 41.9% were from Uganda (see Table 4). Most of the participants in the FGDs from both

Table 4. Background characteristics of the FGD participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Background characteristics</th>
<th>Country</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kenya (Kinango)-% n = 64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants’ characteristics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>17.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>82.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19–28 years</td>
<td>25.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29–38 years</td>
<td>50.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39–48 years</td>
<td>18.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above 48 years</td>
<td>6.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education level</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary level and below</td>
<td>92.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary level</td>
<td>6.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial/middle college</td>
<td>1.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship to pupil</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>89.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibling</td>
<td>1.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other household member</td>
<td>9.38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Kenya and Uganda had primary education, with 92.1% and 76.7% in the two countries, respectively, having secondary education. However, Uganda had 16.3% of the respondents having secondary education. Majority of respondents in the two countries were parents to the children in the respective schools in Kwale and Kinango. Parents comprised 89% of the respondents in Kenya and 90.7% of respondents in Uganda.

Ways in which parents were involved in RtL

Borrowing books

The AKF provided books both in English and Lang’o – the native language in Northern Uganda – at community level that parents borrowed on behalf of their children. This was in addition to the books that had been supplied at school level. The provision of books by the implementer enhanced the enthusiasm among the parents in Uganda. Parents whose children attended Burk School in Uganda said this about the provision of books:

Assistant Moderator: Do you work as a coordinator for AKF? R2: her husband [pointing in the direction of the neighbour] is the one who is a coordinator. R4 affirms this … they are at the home of Mr. Ogwang. R4: These books are there at village level, and it is not the children who borrow; it is their parents …. (Female FGD, 6 July 2011)

Moreover, parents were of the opinion that after working closely with the implementer, lead parents took the initiative to encourage community learning through borrowing books on behalf of their children. In so doing, parents were empowered to be teachers outside the classroom. Parents whose children attended Burk Primary School said this:

Moderator: Where are the books found? R4: … It is not the children who borrow; it is their parents. A parent signs for the number of books they need, and takes the book, and when they bring it back, I acknowledge. Moderator: Which village is that? R4: Am from Abwoc Col village. In this village, it is the parent that takes … What the children keep are the books that they get from school. (Female FGD, 6 July 2011)

It is clear that there was a lot of enthusiasm that emanated from the presence of books at village level. Parental narratives point to the enthusiasm with which they received the books from implementer in Uganda. Even though a higher proportion did not read to their children at baseline, the enthusiasm with books at endline among the parents who attended the FGDS point to enhanced parental engagement with their children’s learning, in the period leading up to the endline. This was made possible by active participation of the ‘lead parents’ during the implementation.

Parents involved during the initial process of the implementation

The implementer of EAQEL (AKF) involved parents in the whole process of implementation of the intervention. According to the parents, their names were registered by AKF, and they were assembled in the various schools once contacted by the respective head teachers of the schools. This corroborates the key component of the process of implementation of the RtL that included the training of parents in the RtL approach. The review of the AKF Grant Report for the period April–June 2009 explains the following,

the project staff then trained 1101 parents (469 male and 632 female) from 20 schools in Kinango district and 759 parents (668 male and 358 female) from 23 schools in Amolatar on how to use the RfC training guide developed by the project.
Parents were trained in the key components of RtL by the AKF from the very beginning. For some parents in Uganda, this made them to exhibit positivism and enthusiasm for RtL. Respondents in an FGD from Agweno primary school attending an FGD reported the following on the process of their involvement in the implementation process of RtL:

Assistant Moderator: Someone said something very interesting, and I feel I need clarification; (to R7), you said that a lot of visitors come to your home, and also that you have books at your place; where did you get these books from? Respondent 7: AKF called parents here for a meeting, some came and others did not. They registered our names in their books. Later the Head teacher of the school called us; three people in three villages; I from Agweno village, Olengo Jimmy from Owiri Village, and Francis Olum for Nyanglit village … So these books were given by AKF and those of us that keep them are called lead parents. The children come and borrow … that is why am saying visitors come to my house from time to time. Even the head teacher came to my home the other day. There were so many people … so they sat under the mango tree and read books. (Female FGD, 19 July 2011)

Interaction with other parents and teachers

Parents also became involved in their children literacy activities by interacting with other parents. In the process of this interaction, they received information on the availability of books from AKF. In due course they were able to ask their children to borrow. One parent from Burk in Amolatar in Uganda says this in relation to the RtL, ‘I have seen its goodness … ’ Parents from Agweno had this say about their interaction with other parents in order to boost reading and numeracy in Amolatar:

Moderator: Do you know what AKF has done to improve the education of your children in this school? R9: I also know only about those books. R5: it’s true the books were given … my child got a copy when he was in P.1 at the time. The person who was keeping those books at the community came to me and told me about them. I went and borrowed the books, met with other parents … they had come to borrow books too, for their children … R7: the organization has done a [good thing] to enable our children to read and write …. (Female FGD, 19 July 2011)

Moreover, parents were involved in their children’s literacy activities by attending meetings in school wherever they were called upon by teachers to share the ideas on what was working for them as parents charged with the responsibility of ensuring that their children have the necessary books at home, and borrowing of the books for the children to read. Parents from Tam School in Amolatar explained:

Moderator: What is your contribution in helping children in reading and writing? R2: Yes, we come every time they call us for meetings. We come, share ideas with them. R1: Those of us who are given the books to keep, we gather children on Saturdays, and we encourage them to tell stories to one another. This happens even in the communities. I make sure I have checked the books for mathematics or a work book where they do their rough … . (Male FGD, 6 July 2011)

Parents both in the treatment and control schools in Kenya exhibited similarities in parent–school relationships. For instance, they also consulted the teachers about their children’s performance. They realised that good performance in school was important to the children. However, they left the burden of ensuring that the children read and do maths to the teachers. They saw their role as empowering the teachers to do what
they do best. Parents whose children attended Zeras Primary School, a control school had this to say:

Moderator: *What is your role in your child’s education?* When I read those school reports, I was not happy. I was forced to come to school. I took that responsibility and came to school, I saw his teacher who explained to me where the problem was. Aah … I felt that I should take another step because a teacher alone cannot help the child. Aah, then we sat down with the teacher and talked … Most of the time I also pass by school and look at the progress of the child instead of sitting at home until the child does the exam and you are brought the report … it is not in order that the parent is not concerned. That makes the child not to have that motivation …. (Female FGD, 27 June 2011)

Parental narratives from the FGDs point to the interaction of parents and teachers, which also included school visits. This is reflected in the survey responses from parents in the baseline regarding parental visits to school. For instance, 62.9% and 49% paid visits to their children’s schools at the baseline in Kenya and Uganda, respectively.

*Parents helping with homework, reading and revising*

Parental involvement that entailed helping with homework, reading and revising was evident in the treatment schools in Uganda. In addition, *older siblings* of the children in P.1 and P.2 were available to read with their sisters and brothers in the lower classes. In addition, parents were also advised by AKF to help children *prepare those materials* that are required for teaching and learning of numeracy, like counting materials. This is what the respondents in a parents’ FGD from Burk observed:

Moderator: *Do you know what AKF has done to improve the education of your children in this school?* R5: we were taught that when a child comes home from school, you should get their books and revise school work with them. So for me that was the greatest [advantage of this program]. It helped my child perform very well at the end of the term … teach them hygiene … R4: those books are very good, and they are also available in [English and Lang’o]. I have them at my home; that is where they are kept. The children ahead can always help the younger ones with their reading, and they learn faster together …. (Female FGD, 6 July 2011)

However, in the control schools in Uganda sample of parents painted a picture of parents who were remotely involved with their children schooling. It was mandatory that they check the books. Either the parent or any significant other could check the books. It was clear that parents were more or less concerned with whether the teacher had ‘marked’ and if the books need replacement. Respondents in a parental FGD whose children attend Reny primary school, a control school said:

Moderator: *What are you doing as parents to improve their level of literacy?* R4: after class, there is a [girl] who checks to see what the child has done, [for me I only see if it’s marked]. Moderator: *How often is this done?* R2: I check but not often. But when I have to, I check to see if it is marked, if I find that it is not, then I ask why … I urge parents to help provide for their children all the materials they need and those who can read should also try, however busy they are to look into their children’s books and guide them. (Female FGD, 15 July 2011)

In Kenya, parents also took the initiative to check the children’s work when they came home from school, in order to ensure that the children had learnt in school and that work given had to be done. This is what the parents of children from Deri School a treatment
school said about their involvement in their children’s literacy and numeracy campaigns spearheaded by AKF:

Moderator: What did you do as a way of sharing encouraging your child to improve in school?
Participant 2: when he arrives home, I must look at the work he has done … I mean at school and when you see he is not progressing well, instead of continuing going on the way he is … I give guidance …. (Both male and female FGD, 28 June 2011)

In addition, parents in some of the control schools in Kenya reported that they helped with homework. Moreover, they sought advice from the teachers on how to improve their children's performance in Maths and English. Parents attending the FGD from Auni a control school reported:

Moderator: Is there anyone who has a different thought apart from those which have come up?
R.3 [Woman]: … I look at his books and if I find out that he is not doing well, I go to his class teacher and I ask him, ‘How is this child doing?’ then I am made to understand and another time we will go with him [child] and he is given homework to do … slowly-by-slowly he goes through the work until he gets those things he is supposed to, and then I can know whether I have a problem or not … So, at that time I go to school and get to his teacher. If it is Math he doesn’t understand, I am advised, if it is English, I am advised if there is a topic he doesn’t understand, he tells me and he is given homework little by little …. (Female FGD, 29 June 2011)

Parental narratives on the assistance with homework, reading and revising, mainly focused on the need to know that children had additional work from school which they could attempt and complete with the assistance of household members. To this end, the narratives mirror the baseline parental views where, in the case of Kenya, 60% of children always came home with homework. In addition, 27.8% and 26.7% in Kenya and Uganda, respectively, were assisted to complete their homework from school. Moreover, other household members always helped 41.5% of the children in Uganda to complete their homework; while in Kenya, 41% of the children were assisted at certain times with homework in Kenya.

AKF as a partner and motivator for parents

Parental involvement was boosted by AKF acting as a partner and motivator for parents and in the process of the literacy and numeracy intervention. AKF advised parents on effective use of pupils’ time and value of their children’s education. This role was complimentary to the trust that has been built between the community in Uganda and AKF over a period of time. These parents associated the implementer with positive educational outcomes. This was very instrumental in enhancing the positive attitude that parents had on the ability of AKF to effect change in this community.

Moderator: Any other ideas? R3: AKF is also giving the parents good ideas for the future of their children. Moderator: What kinds of advice/ideas? R3: telling parents that the future of this country lies in education of children and their participation in their children’s education … encouraging parents and children from time to time. Some parents and even children fear to come and borrow books from the schools, but with what AKF has done, it is easier at community levels, parents come because we are parents like them, and they don’t fear us …. (Female FGD, 19 July 2011)

AKF ‘brought schools to our children’

One of strongest sentiments about RtL was expressed in Uganda. Parents in Uganda strongly felt that AKF enhanced parental participation in their children literacy and numeracy by decentralising the classroom interaction, as one participant strongly put it ‘AKF brought schools to our children.’ From the perception of the parents, AKF connected the
schools to the communities and encouraged parents to be the intermediaries between the school, the community and their children. Parents supported their children learning within the community on specific days with the schools. In addition, peer learning was also encouraged from the older siblings who were in the upper grades. This is what parents attending FGD at Tam Primary School, one of the treatment schools in Uganda said:

Moderator: Now we are going to begin our questions … Does anyone know about AKF or their activities? R8: The good thing they have done here is encouraging the teaching children to read well. In the past they could not read, but now because of AKF programs, they understand Lang’o well … Moderator: Is there anyone who knows anything else? R9: What AKF has done here for us is enabling our children to read well and also bringing the parents together with children. [They have brought schools to our children…]

Moderator: Brought schools for your children? R9: They have brought community libraries at village level where the children go to read … Moderator: How do these ‘classes’ work? R9: On arranged days, children, teachers and the parents come together and learn using the books borrowed … Moderator: Could you please shed more light on how these community libraries work? I’d like to understand better. R9: What happens is that they call children, especially P.1 to P.3 on the agreed dates, and the children go with their parents; they are taught while their parents are also present to give support. Also older pupils of, say, P.6 also come to help these young ones. (Male FGD, 6 July 2011)

The results presented above show the different ways in which the parents were involved in their children’s education. To a larger extent, there was a positive and enthusiasm among parents representing treatment schools in regard to the implementation and their role with RtL. However, there were factors that hindered effective parental involvement in the numeracy and literacy activities. These included: illiteracy among parents; parents feeling burdened with making RtL materials; and inadequate knowledge among some parents of the existence of community libraries.

Illicit among parents

Parents in Kenya expressed their concerns on the impact of parental illiteracy on children’s proficiency in reading. The RtL intervention by AKF required the parents to read to their children at home. If parents were not able to read, it meant that they could not read with their children at home. Consequently, the parental component of the intervention was rendered ineffective in such circumstances. Parents in Kanyeni primary school in Kenya had this to say:

R2: ‘… I never got educated and his father never got educated …’ R4 ‘I don’t have any experience in this system because I never got educated. My husband also never got educated so he can’t show his children how to read ….’. (Mixed FGD, 27 June 2011, Kenya)

Parents burdened making the EAQEL materials

Male parents in Kenya felt that making the RtL materials took a lot of their time. At the same time, children did not make it easier as they lost materials while carrying them to and from school. A respondent among the male parents attending an FGD from Nzini Primary School had the following to say,

R2: … now that cutting and arranging boxes into materials … I feel like it becomes a burden because sometimes the number which you have cut, the child misplaces, when you
come from work you are supposed to look for another box and cut …. (Male FGD, 28 June, Kenya)

Knowledge of the existence of community libraries

Scores of parents were not aware of the existence of the community libraries. Some of the parents felt that those parents who kept books did not make it public to others from outside their villages. Such parents learnt much latter of the existence of the community libraries and this hampered their efforts of ensuring that their children were able to read. Respondents attending FGD’s at Burk primary school in Uganda had this to say,

R2: Parents do not know that these books exist, so we don’t expect them to borrow. The people who keep these books do not publicize so they do not know (Burk, Female FGD, Uganda).

These sentiments were echoed by parents who attended an FGD in Agweno primary school in Uganda. A respondent had this to say, R6: At community level there is the problem that parents are not aware of the existence of community libraries. Some of them learnt much later. (Female FGD, 19 July 2011, Uganda)

The next section presents the discussion and the conclusions.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper sought to highlight parental experiences with the RtL. In particular, how parents were involved with RtL approach in its attempts to improve literacy and numeracy among grades 1–3 in Kenya and Uganda. We find that parental narratives portray parents as key actors in literacy and numeracy through their involvement. Parents borrowed books for their children; interacted with parents and teachers; and helped with homework, reading and revising, in an attempt to improve their children’s literacy and numeracy. These activities are similar to those classified by scholars (Hill and Taylor 2004) as some key components of parental involvement with their children’s education. In particular, there was a concurrence of parents’ views at baseline and endline as relates to parental interaction with teachers through school visits and assistance with homework. Moreover, parents in Uganda spoke enthusiastically about their involvement in these activities, and their narratives had positive undertones of the RtL intervention and its implementation.

This paper stresses the fact that parental influences are key to children’s mastery in reading. Parental narratives point to positive and enthusiastic involvement in reading activities that were key to oral literacy gains in Uganda. Moreover, higher proportions of parents in Uganda told stories to their children at the beginning of the project. To this end, the parental narratives corroborate the quantitative results that show that there was a treatment effect of oral and written literacy in Uganda. In addition, when literacy scores were compared across districts, the treatment effect was found to be higher in Amolatar, the core plus model district, than in Dokolo, core model district. We suggest that the enthusiasm that was shown by the parents in Uganda in the literacy activities, in part, explains the treatment effect. This finding mirrors what scholars (Senechal and LeFevre 2002) have established that reading is more sensitive to parental influences (Jordan, Snow, and Porsche 2000), in this particular study to active, positive and enthusiastic parental involvement.

Parents in Uganda were particularly pleased to see learning materials for their children in the local language and were generally very positive about EAQEL. Moreover, the enthusiastic parent–implementer–child involvement led to ownership of EAQEL intervention
with a very clear understanding of parental roles and involvement – summed up by the phrase from Ugandan parents – ‘AKF brought schools to our children.’ However, in Kenya, this receptive description of EAQEL was not very clear. For instance, the findings show that parents in both control and treatment schools seemed to portray similar characteristics in terms of their participation in literacy activities. One plausible explanation is that parents in Kenya seemed to have had prior involvement in their children’s education, whereas in Uganda, greater enthusiasm attached to EAQEL by parents, could be related to the excitement of being supplied with text books after a long time, and Northern Uganda, being a region that had experienced conflict in the recent past, such enthusiasm in education is expected.

This study underscores the importance of context in the implementation process. As has been argued by Darling-Hammond (1990, 342) that implementers of education reforms sometimes ‘… fill the gaps in their understanding of the policy with what is already familiar to them …’. Therefore, the internalisation of RtL was largely dependent on the implementation context that existed in the two countries. For instance, teachers who were in charge of the RtL instructional procedures were trained in their respective countries – it is probable that this may have culminated into different instructional strategies for the teachers in respective countries. In addition, narratives of parents in both Kenya and Uganda reveal that certain factors may have been overlooked during the implementation process, leading to a much anticipated expectation of EAQEL. These factors include: illiteracy among parents; parents burdened by constantly being asked to make EAQEL materials; lack of motivation among parents; and ignorance among parents of the existence of community libraries. In particular, illiteracy may have incapacitated parents’ attempts at promoting literacy activities among their children in grades 1–3. This study is limited in the sense that it explores the experiences of a select group of parents in the Kinango, Kenya and Amolatar in Uganda at endline. In conclusion, this study underscores the importance of parental involvement in improving children’s literacy. This may be context specific. Finally, EAQEL was a very complex intervention, whose impact depended on the implementation process, and that context matters in the success of RCT in education.

Acknowledgements
We acknowledge the important contribution of APHRC staff who participated at various stages of the development of the impact evaluation study. We particularly would like to mention Alex Ezeh, Charles Epari, Evangeline Nderu and Catherine Macharia. We are also grateful to the implementers of RtL, the AKF, and to the host countries’ Ministries of Education for providing useful information and supporting the study. Funding for this study was provided by The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation through the Education Research Programme at APHRC. Views presented in this paper are only those of the authors and not necessarily shared by those mentioned.

Note
1. The names of all schools used in this article are pseudonyms for purposes of anonymity.

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