



Save the Children®

Literacy Boost

Malawi

Home Literacy Environment Baseline Report 2009

Karen Wiener

© 2009 Save the Children

1. Introduction

Learning to read is at the heart of any basic education program; being able to read fluently and comprehend text is necessary as children move from learning to read to reading to learn. The Literacy Boost program, which is currently being piloted in Malawi for the 2009 academic year, seeks to strengthen children's reading ability by bringing literacy from the school and into their villages and homes. Parents can play an essential role in helping their children learn, not only through direct literacy instruction and assistance with school work, but also through having positive attitudes toward literacy, modeling reading and writing habits, and providing the necessary materials and environment for children to continue learning at home.

The purpose of the Household Literacy Environment Baseline Study is to examine how reading and writing are currently part of the home environment. Four domains were specifically investigated: (1) the printed materials and resources children are exposed to at home; (2) the literacy levels of other household members and their reading and writing habits; (3) the attitudes and perceptions of household members toward literacy, and (4) the interactions between children and literate family members.

2. Research Design

Site

Data for the Household Literacy Environment Baseline Study were collected from eight schools in St. Martin's Zone in Zomba Rural District, the site chosen for Save the Children's Literacy Boost initiative. Schools were scattered at varying distances from the central town within the zone, with the nearest school located directly in town and the furthest approximately 8km away. The town itself is approximately 1.5 hours from Zomba where the nearest grocery stores, banks, and petrol stations can be found. Most people in the zone engage in subsistence agriculture, and at the time of the baseline study were harvesting tobacco. Poverty and hunger are common in the area.

Sample

In each of the eight participating schools, twenty children had been randomly selected from Standard 2 to complete an initial assessment of their reading and math abilities. From these children, approximately 10-15 were randomly selected from each school to participate in the Household Literacy Environment Baseline Study, totaling 96 children. The homes of each of these children were located, and the parent present with the highest level of education was interviewed. Forty-seven percent of those interviewed were mothers, 34 percent were fathers, 9 percent were grandparents, and the remainder represented sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles, and step-parents. Fifty-three percent of the children whose families were selected were girls.

Methods

At each child's home, the research team introduced Literacy Boost and asked for the family's assistance. Once consent was provided, respondents were asked questions regarding their

household and belongings, their educational history, their reading and writing habits and attitudes, and their interactions with the study child. All questions were asked in English by the lead investigator and translated into Chichewa by an assistant. Responses were typically provided in Chichewa (a few respondents preferred to answer in English) and recorded. Following the survey, an observation of the outdoor environment was conducted by walking once around the outside of the house and noting the presence of various printed materials.

3. Material Resources and Exposure to Print

What printed materials are children exposed to in their homes?

Presence of Print Inside the Home				
	English		Chichewa	
	Mean	Percentage who have	Mean	Percentage who have
Adult books, non-religious	0.50	6%	0.12	6%
Adult books, religious	0.37	15%	1.61	63%
Learner's books	1.01	33%	0.86	40%
Children's books, non-religious	0.01	1%	0.01	1%
Children's books, religious	0.00	0%	0.02	1%
Newspapers	0.73	12%	0.18	7%
Magazines	0.00	0%	0.01	1%
Posters/wall-hangings/calendars	0.30	11%	0.43	23%
Children's posters	0.06	13%	0.01	1%

Respondents were asked to report on a variety of materials in their homes. In general, children are surrounded by low levels of print. Respondents reported that households are most likely to own religious books such as the Bible or Quran, especially those written in Chichewa: the average family owns 1.6 religious books in Chichewa.

Learner's books are also often present in homes, especially in households with older children; 45 percent of households possess at least one learner's book, either in English or Chichewa. Of the study children, however, only

28 percent bring home their Standard 2 learner's books from school. Furthermore, only two families reported that they had purchased an extra learner's book for their children, which are commonly available in urban markets. The limited availability of these books in remote villages and the poverty of families both likely contribute to their absence in homes.

It is important to note that despite the existence of these materials, whether they are actually visible to children is unknown. For example, one mother, when offering to show the various books she owned, commented that she keeps them locked up in a suitcase inside her home.

Outside of the home, observations revealed that there is also little exposure to print. The most common form of print that children might see outside of their home was writing directly on

their homes, which almost always occurred in the form of the recent census markings above their doorways (e.g. “PHC-107”). More than half of children also had print around them in the form of litter, including marked wrappings, bags, and cans.

Presence of Print Outside the Home	
Buildings	58%
Litter	55%
Clothing	27%
Consumption goods (e.g. containers, batteries, bottles)	26%
Curtains/window coverings	8%
Books	5%
Newspapers	1%

One unusual form of printed material emerged from the observations: the presence of print on clothing. Printed *chitenges* and *kangas* (both forms of sarongs) were particularly common, either worn by women, hanging out to dry, or wrapped around infants. While words on *chitenges* typically commemorated an event or supported a political party (in Chichewa or English), Swahili proverbs are commonplace on *kangas* (and are likely meaningless to Malawian families). Nevertheless, print on clothing may be an important vehicle through which children are exposed to print form a young age.

What other household conditions may affect their ability to read in the home?

Respondents were also asked to report on a variety of other household characteristics that might affect the ability to read in the home. Sixty-eight percent of families reported that they own one kerosene lamp, while 27 percent own two. Informal observations showed that some homes, despite containing several separate housing structures, still only have one lamp to share amongst them. Only one family reported having electrical lighting of some sort.

The general impression when talking to families is that very little time is spent inside the home. Homes are small; on average they have three rooms. However, rooms are often used to store grain or even keep livestock at night for fear of theft. A few homes were visited during data collection; in general they are very dark even during daylight hours (and often extremely smoky due to cooking). The light of a single kerosene lamp at night would probably do little to illuminate a room, and thus fail to provide children with the opportunity to read at night. The lack of lighting and time spent indoors also likely means that children have little exposure to the few books, newspapers, and calendars that families reported owning.

Household were also asked to report on whether they owned the materials needed for writing. Sixty-five percent of households reported they did not have anything to write on (not counting the exercise books children brought from school). Furthermore, 44 percent did not own a pen or pencil. The lack of these materials affects: (1) the possibility of children seeing their parents model writing; (2) parents’ abilities to practice reading and writing with their children at home; and (3) children’s abilities to do homework or practice what they learned in school.

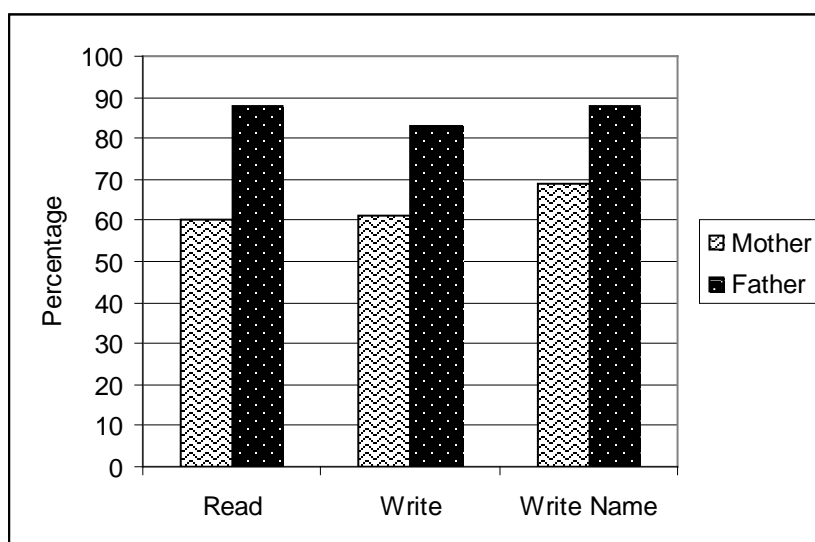
Is there a relationship between the reading materials found in the home and children’s ability to read and write?

As noted, baseline data were collected on the reading and math performance of Standard 2 children. One reading indicator for which data were collected was the percentage of words that a child could read correctly from a list of twenty common Chichewa words for Standard 2 children, while writing ability was measured by having children write as many words in Chichewa as they could think of in ten minutes. The availability of material resources and exposure to print was found to have no relationship to children's reading and writing abilities. For example, families that owned more books were *not* more likely to have children who could read basic words.

4. Levels of Literacy in the Home and Reading and Writing Habits

What levels of literacy and occurrences of reading are children surrounded by?

On average, study children have slightly less than two people in their household who can read (1.98) and write (1.95). With an average of 5.28 people in each house, 46 percent of those in the household can read and 45 percent can write (not including the study child). However, 16 percent of households in the study have no individual who is able to read or write.



Sixty percent of mothers could reportedly read a simple sentence while 40 percent could not; 88 percent of fathers could reportedly read a simple sentence while 12 percent could not. However, during the interviews it was sometimes doubtful that parents could actually read despite what they reported, in particular among fathers. Interviews often drew crowds of neighbors, and

admitting one's inability to read is understandable in such circumstances. Using a minimum of a Standard 4 education as a proxy for the ability to read, 59 percent of mothers would be able to read based on their levels of education, a figure similar to their reported ability to read. However, only 71 percent of fathers progressed to Standard 4 or beyond, despite 88 percent reporting they could read.

Siblings provide another source of potential assistance for learning how to read and modeling of positive literacy habits and attitudes. Study children had, on average, 2.5 siblings (including cousins living in the home, although these were rare). On average, however, only 0.75 siblings could read, and half of all study children did not have a sibling in the home that was literate.

In terms of actual reading practices, 65 percent of those who could read reported that they had read something in the last seven days, and 45 percent reported that they had written something

in the last week. In addition, over two-thirds (69 percent) of all households reported that they spend no money on reading materials (such as newspapers) in the average week. For those who do purchase reading materials, they generally spend less than 100Mk (70 cents). Discussions with parents often revealed that most families are only buying single pages of outdated newspapers (current papers were generally not available in these areas). In a few cases, families noted that they purchase newspapers not for reading purposes but for wrapping up packages of food that they sell.

What do respondents read?*	
Religious books	60%
Learners' books	32%
Newspapers	31%
Non-religious Books	9%
Do not read anything although know how to	7%
Magazines	6%
Pamphlets	1%
*Respondents could report more than one answer	

Respondents reported reading most often for knowledge and for keeping up to date on current affairs. Some of those surveyed noted that they specifically read for religious knowledge and spiritual growth. Reading for relaxation or fun is less common, but understandable given the lack of materials with which to read. A few parents also noted that they read their children's learners' books so as not to forget what they learned when they were in school.

Respondents noted that, by and large, the most frequent material they read is religious books. Learners' books and newspapers are also read by approximately a third of all respondents. Informal conversations with families suggest that reading material in general is difficult to come by, and thus the practice of reading is generally erratic.

Why do respondents read?*	
To learn/keep up to date on current affairs	52%
For religious education/spiritual growth	34%
To relax/for fun	18%
So as not to forget	8%
To help child with school	2%
*Respondents could report more than one answer	

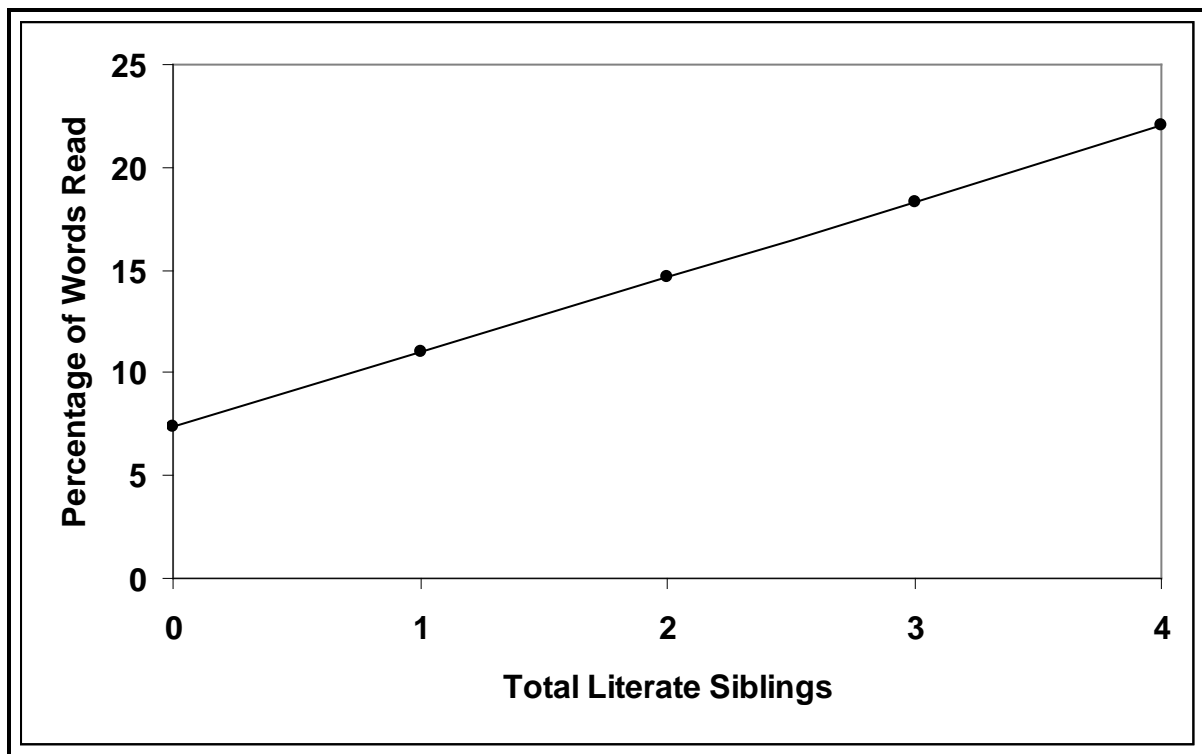
What do respondents write?*	
Letters	32%
Do not write anything although know how	29%
Religious passages	17%
Club membership	9%
Job-related material	9%
Shopping lists/household budgets	6%
School work	6%
Poetry/songs	6%
Personal thoughts	3%
*Respondents could report more than one answer	

When literate respondents were asked what kinds of things they write, parents and guardians most frequently reported writing letters. However, a substantial proportion noted that although they know how to write, they do not ever write anything. These findings indicate several different scenarios. First, the infrequency of reading and especially writing among respondents might be due to the fact that they do not have a purpose for writing in their daily lives as predominantly subsistence farmers. Second, it is also possible that respondents fail to write because they do not possess the pens and papers needed to write. However, it is difficult to determine if the lack of supplies is driven by poverty or because

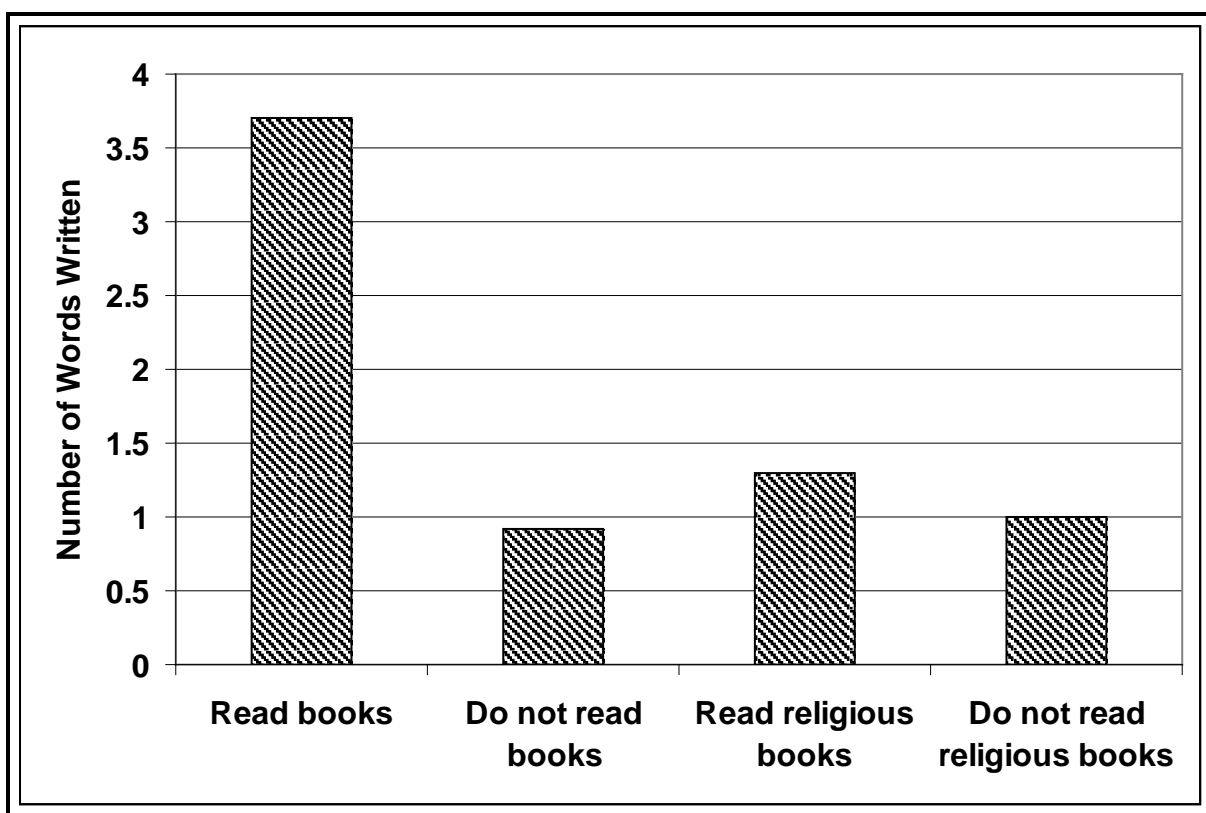
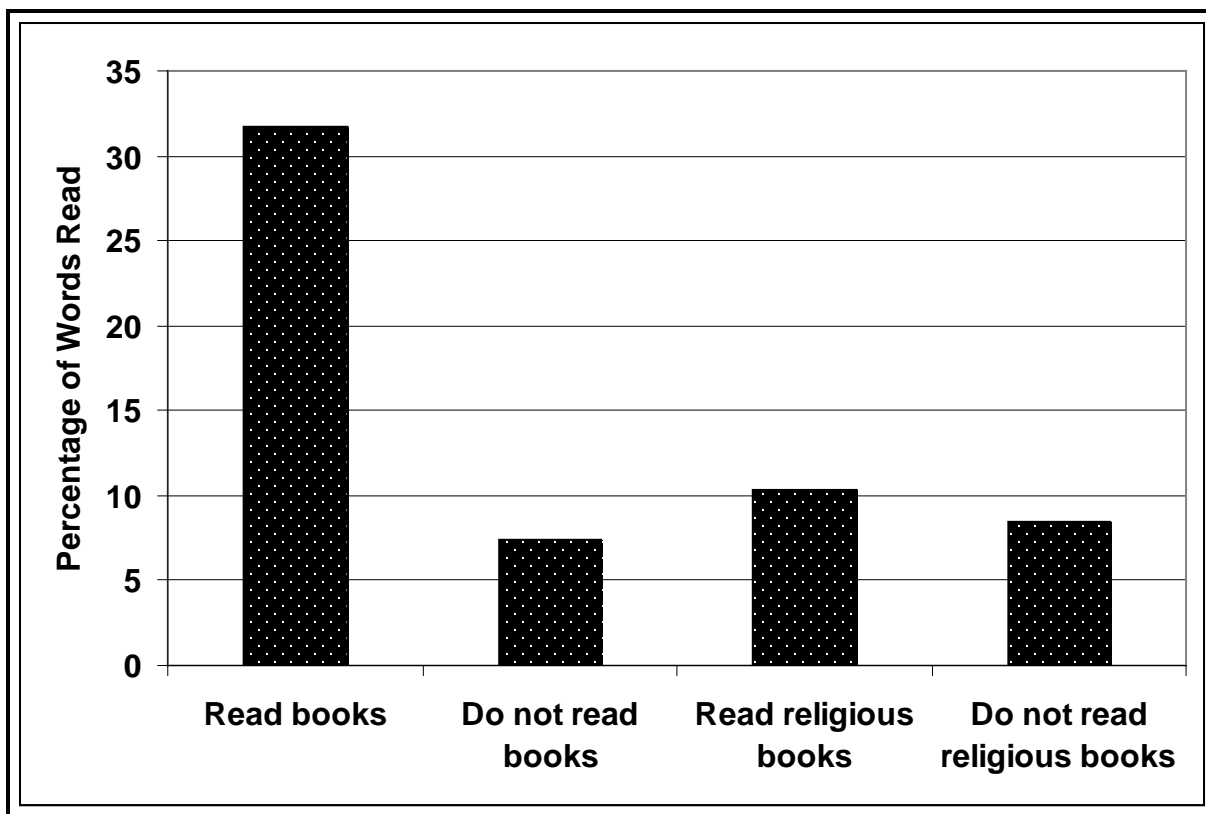
families do not need/want the materials. Third, as noted earlier, the lack of literacy habits might reflect that although they reported that they could read and write, some respondents in fact could not.

Is there a relationship between the literacy levels and habits of household members and children's ability to read and write?

Few of the family characteristics and habits listed above were found to relate to children's abilities to read and write. However, there are a few notable exceptions. First, the total number of literate siblings a child has does relate to his or her ability to read (but not to write). On average in the population, children with one additional literate sibling are able to read 3 percent more Chichewa words than those with one fewer literate sibling.



Second, literate respondents who reported reading non-religious books, as compared to those who did not read them, had children who could read significantly more words (mean score = 31.7 compared to 7.4, respectively). The same trend did not hold for those respondents who reported reading religious books compared to those who do not, as the slight difference in means was insignificant (mean score = 10.3 compared to 8.5, respectively). A similar pattern was found for writing scores. Children who lived in homes where the respondent read books wrote more words than those children living in homes where the respondent did not (mean score = 3.7 compared to 0.92, respectively.) Those children who lived in homes where the respondent read religious books did not score significantly different than those who lived in homes where such books were not read (mean score = 1.3 compared to 1.0, respectively).



5. Attitudes and Perceptions of Literacy

What are family member's attitudes and perceptions of reading and writing?

Respondents were read a series of statements about reading and writing and asked to indicate if they agree or disagree. In general, family members showed a strong commitment to teaching all children how to read. However, there is concern that parents were agreeing to satisfy the research team. Many respondents agreed that the teacher is the only person responsible for teaching children--the first statement read--without considering that they had a role in the process until it was later suggested to them.

What are family members' attitudes toward literacy?	
	<i>Percent who agree</i>
The teacher is the only person responsible for teaching children how to read.	47%
I do not know how to help my child learn to read.	48%
It is important for a child to be exposed to books and other writing from a young age.	100%
Every child should learn how to read.	99%
Parents and teachers should work together to teach reading.	100%
It is difficult for someone like me to help my child learn to read.	52%
It is not worth teaching some children to learn how to read.	10%
Parents should be involved in teaching their children how to read.	100%
There are many benefits to knowing how to read.	100%
I feel confident I can help my child learn to read.	73%
Children should learn to read from their older siblings or cousins.	96%
(Study child) likes to read.	84%
Knowing how to read is necessary for getting a good job one day.	100%

Of interest are responses about how capable parents feel they are for helping their children learn to read. About half of all respondents agree that they do not know how to help their child learn to read, and that it is difficult for them to help their child (likely due to their own lack of skills, as well as available time and resources to assist). Although nearly three-quarters of respondents agree that they feel confident in helping their child learn to read, explorations of this response revealed that respondents often interpreted this as "I *would* feel confident if I had gone to school/had the time/had the resources."

Parents and guardians were also asked by what age they felt a child should be able to read and by what age a child should be able to write. On average, they reported that a child should be able to read by 7.3 years of age (range 2-20), and write by 7.5 years of age (range 2-17). However, with an average age of 9.9 among the study children, remarkably few parents reported that their children possessed these abilities. Only 28 percent of children were reportedly able to read, 19 percent to write, and 54 percent to write their name.

Of note, parental reports of their children's abilities bear almost no relationship to their abilities as indicated by baseline assessments. There was no significant difference in the mean percentage of Chichewa words read between the group who reportedly *could* read and the group who reportedly *could not* read; the correlation between actual and perceived reading ability was 0.15. There was also no significant difference in the mean number of Chichewa words a child could write between the group who reportedly *could* write and the group who *could not* write; the correlation between actual and perceived writing ability was 0.04.

The fact that parents were unable to correctly determine if their child could read or write might reflect a variety of issues. It might be that some families want to report a better picture of their child's abilities than they know to really be the case. However, it might also be reflective of the fact that some parents are unaware of their child's abilities to read and write. Follow-up analysis shows that the latter is likely the case. When subdivided into groups of parents who said they know what goes on in their child's class and those that said they do not (a proxy for "awareness"), those that are aware could accurately report their child's abilities to read and write, while the other group could not. Yet being aware of what is going on in a child's class and monitoring his or her abilities does not appear to be enough. There is no relationship between a respondent knowing what happens in a child's class and his or her abilities to read and write.

Is there a relationship between parental attitudes and perceptions of literacy and children's ability to read and write?

Given the relative homogenous nature of parental attitudes about literacy, there is little surprise that there is no relationship between such attitudes and children's performance. Interestingly, however, there is also no relationship between how capable a parent feels and his or her child's performance. One pattern that did emerge is that the older that respondents estimate a child should be able to write, the higher that child's scores are for both reading and writing.

6. Interactions with Literacy in the Home

What interactions do children have with the literate individuals in their homes?

On average, literate respondents reported reading to their child twice in the last week (22 percent did not read at all). The average length of each reading session was between 15 and 30 minutes. When asked what they read to their child, 80 percent of respondents reported that they read the child's learners' book or other school work. Given that few children bring home

their books, it is likely they are mostly reading the child's work in his or her exercise book from school. Observations of the exercise books of Standard 2 pupils throughout the country reveal that what is typically written in their books is not meaningful and difficult to decipher. Thus, the lack of appropriate reading material for parents to use with their children is again demonstrated.

Parent/Respondent Activities and Interactions		
	<i>Mothers</i>	<i>Fathers</i>
Read to child	55%	68%
Help child learn how to read	50%	58%
Help child learn how to write	50%	59%
	<i>Respondents</i>	
Tell oral stories	61%	
Told oral story last week	40%	
Help with homework	51%	
Know what is going on in child's class	49%	
Help in child's class	0%	

Respondents were asked to report on whether each member of the household reads to the child, helps the child learn to read, and helps the child learn to write. The results show that fathers are more likely to help than mothers, which is expected given their higher levels of literacy.

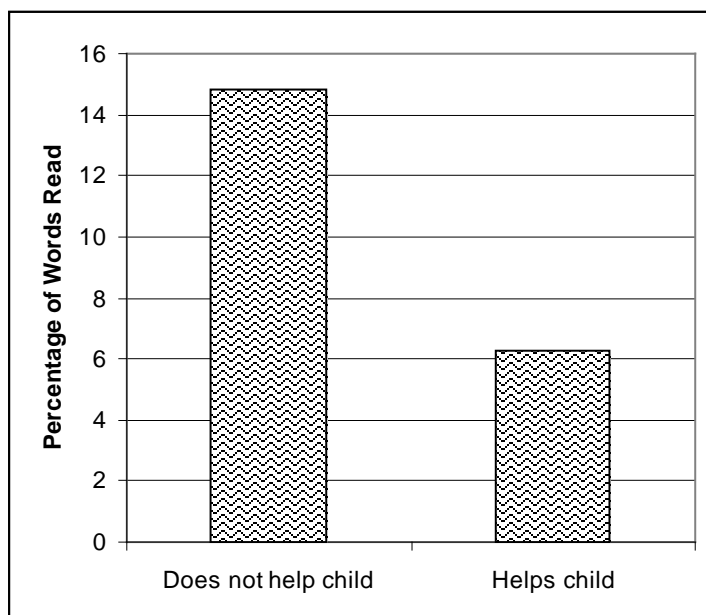
When asked why they read to their child, parents often commented on their desire to improve their child's academic performance. Those who do not read to their child (despite being literate) largely commented on two issues. As noted, many parents referred to the lack of reading materials to read to their child. If they had books, they noted, they would be able to assist. The other issue regularly mentioned was that parents are too busy to read to their child. One mother commented: "(I am) always busy. When the child gets hold of books I say 'can you stop that; let's go deal with tobacco'. The place to learn is school, now we must take care of tobacco at home."

All respondents reported on several other activities that they might do with their child at home which could assist in his or her ability to read. Many reported telling oral stories to their child, doing so on average of 1.47 times in the past week. When asked why they tell these stories, the most common responses were that: (1) for children to learn lessons from these stories; (2) for children to retell the stories at school; and (3) in order to pass on tradition. Literate respondents were also asked—in an open-ended manner—what they specifically do to help their child learn to read and write. As shown in the table, the most frequent response was helping the child with his or her schoolwork, followed by doing nothing to assist the child. Other responses include writing words or the alphabet on cardboard or the ground for the child to practice,

How do respondents assist children in learning how to read?*	
Help with school work	29%
Does nothing to help child	16%
Write words/alphabet for child to read	13%
Encourages child	13%
Reads to child	10%
Help with spelling	7%
Use learner's books to teach	7%
Have child copy/memorize	3%
Purchases school supplies	1%
*Respondents could report more than one answer	

encouraging the child to attend school, reading to the child, helping him spell words, and using the learner's books to teach.

Is there a relationship between children's performance in school and the literacy characteristics, attitudes, and actions of family members in home?



One unexpected finding is that mothers who reportedly helped their child learn to read have children who score significantly lower on tests of reading than those who do not help their child learn to read (mean score =14.8 compared to 6.3, respectively). The same pattern does not exist with writing, nor does it exist among fathers. It is unclear why such a trend occurs, as one would expect children who are assisted to perform *better* than those who do not receive help from home. Follow-up analysis reveals that mothers who are more educated are more likely to help their children read, but it is again unclear why *more*

educated mothers would have children whose reading abilities are *lower* than those mothers who are less educated.

7. Implications and Conclusions

There are several key findings that have emerged from Household Literacy Environment Baseline Study that are worth recapping. One of the key messages that consistently emerged was that there is limited availability of printed materials both inside and outside of homes. This lack of books not only affects children's exposure towards print from a young age, but also affects their ability to see family members interacting with print and their ability to practice with print once they are in school and learning to read. Coupled with this challenge is the limited availability of lighting for families in the evening hours to use for reading and writing.

While on average children are surrounded by several literate individuals who possess strong positive attitudes towards reading and writing, there are several barriers toward using the skills and beliefs of these individuals to help young pupils learn. In addition to the limited books, newspapers, and magazines available, family members often commented that they do not have the time to be able to assist their children due to numerous household tasks. Furthermore, many expressed that they do not feel capable to help, especially in the 16 percent of homes where no individual is able to read and write. Each of these difficulties must be taken into account when attempting to bring literacy learning into the home.