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## PROMOTING CHILDREN'S READING IN KYRGYZSTAN

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### Abstract

This paper is on family reading for children in Kyrgyzstan a Central Asian former USSR state. Poor reading skills lead to poor learning in all other subjects. This paper presents the research study on the Reading for Children project, which aimed to promote a love for reading and enthusiasm for books from early ages. The study also identifies whether the Reading for Children project has had any impact on language skills of small children. The study was conducted with the help of survey questionnaire, individual and group interviews as well as observation. The study findings demonstrated that Parents' involvement in reading tasks can help develop their children's interest in reading. The study demonstrated that the Reading for Children project increased access to children's age-appropriate reading materials, promoted enjoyable reading experiences between parents and children, and strengthened family bonds between parents and conducting series of trainings on family reading. In addition, there were indications that the project had also positively influenced the children's attitude towards education and performance at school. Paper offers practice and policy recommendations.

**Keywords:** family reading; education research; pre-school and primary school; Kyrgyzstan

### Abstrak

*Pembahasan Artikel ini tentang bacaan keluarga, untuk anak-anak di Kyrgyzstan Central Asian former USSR state. Kemampuan membaca yang buruk mengakibatkan daya belajar yang rendah pada semua mata pelajaran. Jika siswa belajar untuk membaca di usia awal dan pada tingkat kecepatan membaca yang memadai, maka mereka mempunyai kesempatan yang lebih besar untuk bertindak lebih baik di sekolah. Artikel ini menyajikan penelitian tentang proyek membaca untuk anak-anak, yang bertujuan untuk mempromosikan kecintaan terhadap membaca dan antusiasme terhadap buku sejak usia dini. Penelitian ini juga mengidentifikasi apakah proyek bacaan pada anak-anak telah memiliki dampak terhadap kemampuan bahasa anak-anak kecil. Penelitian dilakukan dengan angket survey, wawancara individu dan kelompok, dan observasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa keterlibatan orang tua dalam tugas-tugas membaca dapat membantu mengembangkan minat membaca anak-anak mereka. Penelitian menunjukkan bahwa proyek membaca untuk siswa meningkatkan akses kepada materi bacaan yang sesuai dengan usia anak-anak, mempromosikan pengalaman membaca yang menyenangkan antara orang tua dan anak-anak, dan memperkuat ikatan keluarga antar-orang tua, dan mengadakan rangkaian pelatihan bacaan keluarga. Selain itu, terindikasi bahwa proyek tersebut juga mempengaruhi secara positif sikap anak-anak terhadap pendidikan dan prestasi di sekolah. Tulisan menganjurkan latihan dan rekomendasi kebijakan.*

**Kata kunci:** bacaan keluarga; penelitian pendidikan; taman kanak-kanak dan sekolah dasar; Kyrgyzstan

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## Introduction

During the former Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan achieved significant progress in the field of education (Shamatov, 2005). There were many achievements, including: almost universal adult literacy, high graduation rates, solid levels of student achievement in mathematics and science, and low dropout rates (Shamatov, 2013).

That education system was a good fit for the planned economy of the USSR. However, Kyrgyzstan started experiencing serious problems in all public spheres, including education after the break-up of the USSR (Silova, 2009; Shamatov, 2015). The education system suffered major systemic shocks, including a dramatic loss of available financial resources and an inexorable transition from planned economies to market-based systems. Market economies require abilities to apply knowledge flexibly, to cope with the cognitive requirements of unfamiliar tasks, to recognize and solve problems and to self-manage new learning. The content and structures of prevailing teaching practices, assessment methodologies, curricula and education finance systems in Kyrgyzstan were not consistent with the acquisition of these skills. The education system in Kyrgyzstan was not prepared for the demands of a market-based economy that valued critical thinking, self-motivation and experiential learning (Shamatov, 2011).

The focus of this paper is reading books at home. The ability to read is the major foundational skill for all school-based learning. Poor reading skills lead to poor learning in all other subjects. If children learn to read at early ages and at a sufficient rate of speed, then they have greater chance to do well at school. As children grow older, it becomes more and more difficult for them to learn to read, and therefore to do well in other subjects as well. This

contributes to many students failing, making them more likely to repeat grades or even drop out. Moreover, children who do not learn to read well are deprived of many future opportunities for continued education, good employment, and a good living standard. Learning to read early and well is a major predictor of children's academic success and longer term wellbeing (RTI, 2009).

## Background of the Study

According to PISA 2006 and 2009, shortage of reading resources (e.g. story books) at home is one of many reasons contributing to the lowering quality of education in Kyrgyzstan (Shamatov, 2014; Shamatov et al, 2014). A shortage of good quality reading materials (literature, story books) contributes to a decrease in love for reading. In addition, many families cannot afford to purchase expensive reading materials.

The problem of shortage of books is particularly acute in rural areas. For example previously there were libraries in almost all villages which would be regularly updated. However, since the break-up of the USSR no new books have been supplied and many village libraries have been closed. School libraries, as stated by the Minister of Education of the Kyrgyz Republic, are currently experiencing difficulties with the provision of school textbooks (equipped with 62% of textbooks only), let alone the provision of children's literature.

In addition, there is a clear lowering of interest in reading literature amongst the majority of the country's population. Public attitude towards reading has changed; the interest in reading has decreased. Children are influenced by television, video, Internet, and computer games (Tvaruzkova & Shamatov, 2012).

All of the above have negatively affected the availability of children's literature in Kyrgyzstan. The decreasing popularity of reading has had a negative impact on children's thinking, their ability to understand text, and reflect on its meaning. According to research studies conducted internationally, the availability of a home library has a positive effect on the education of children. Even if parents have a low level of literacy, a home library raises the level of education of children by an average of three years. Reading books influences children's education better than any other factor, including parents' education or profession, financial standing of a family, and a country's political system (Stooke & McKenzie, 2009). Studies demonstrate the significance of family reading (Bracken, 2008), as it prepares a person for relationship with a book and creates the need for reading. Family reading inculcates effective communication between family members, brings them together and awakens in them a desire to think, reflect, feel and empathize.

### The Reading for Children Project

The Mountain Societies Development Support Programme in Kyrgyzstan (MSDSP KG) was initiated by the Aga Khan Foundation in 2003 with the goal to improve living conditions in select mountain communities of the country. The Reading for Children (RfC) project, implemented by MSDSP KG, was launched in 2007 in Alai district. In 2008 - 2011, the project expanded into Chong-Alai and Kara-Kulja districts of Osh Province and two districts (At-Bashy and Naryn) of Naryn Province. The project aims to promote a love for reading and enthusiasm for books from early ages. Specific objectives as they relate to this assessment include: (a) Increase access to age-appropriate reading materials; (b) Promote enjoyable reading experiences between parents / caregivers / older siblings and young children;

and (c) Strengthen interactions (family bonds) between parents / caregivers and children.

The RfC project seeks to improve children's learning opportunities and achievements through involving parents in reading, establishing Parental Resource Centers (PRC), publishing children's books and making them available in PRCs. RfC mainly targets pre-primary and primary children. However, children up to the age of 12 have benefited as borrowers from the PRC, one of the unintended impacts of RfC.

RfC started in villages where ECD centers had already been established. Remoteness of villages from the district center and communities' willingness, were considered when selecting villages for RfC. MSDSP staff had meetings with community members to discuss children's (lack of) access to story books and reading practices. PRCs were established in the villages where it was considered most appropriate according to these criteria.

PRCs are established within an existing school library or village (community-based) library. Initially, these Parental Resource Centers were called Mini-Libraries (MLs). Later it was realized that the PRCs offer more than just reading books, and they were renamed Parental Resource Centers (PRCs) to reflect the wide range of materials and activities for children's early development that they provide. In addition to parental workshops on effective reading techniques, these PRCs convey many messages on child development including hygiene and sanitation, building relations, learning through games, oral storytelling and so on.

A regular school or village librarian takes care of the PRC located within their library, alongside their other tasks. Thus the PRC operates within the same structure as the library in which it is housed, maintaining a regular

registration and user system. A librarian is a full-time employee paid by government. AKF KG supplies PRCs annually with new copies of children's books.

In addition to stocking books, a PRC contains developmental games, a children's corner, and a television and DVD player for children to watch cartoons. Events such as the annual book festival are hosted at the PRCs. PRCs are designed with children up to the age of 12 as the primary audience. Such an approach to creating a library reflects contemporary trends of work with readers in a rural library.

To date, 66 PRCs have been established in Osh and Naryn Provinces of Kyrgyzstan. Of those, 45 are community-based libraries (CBL) and 21 are school-based libraries (SBL). The staff of all PRCs have received orientation trainings. At the time of the study, the project had reached 23,745 children readers aged 2 to 12 years (8,228 boys and 15,518 girls).

As part of promoting family reading, RfC includes two phases (or 6 modules) of training. The first training is conducted when a PRC is established and it deals with orientation to family reading and promoting reading techniques. The second training is conducted further to promote family reading and teach reading techniques. Trainings are conducted for facilitators and then facilitators conduct workshops for parents.

For each PRC, a facilitator is selected from amongst villagers whose job is to promote family reading. The number of facilitators in each PRC ranges from 3 to 10 depending on the size of the village. A facilitator can be a school teacher, a school librarian or a village librarian depending on the situation. Since the beginning of RfC, 271 facilitators have been trained, of whom 30 are men and 241 are women. Facilitators participate in trainings on reading techniques, how to conduct workshops for adults (parents

and caregivers), especially focusing on family reading. These facilitators then conduct workshops and seminars for parents to promote family reading and build communication amongst them. Facilitators are volunteers although they are paid a small amount of money (about 400-500 som per workshop, i.e. \$ 9-11) for each training they conduct.

Facilitators conduct workshops (trainings) for parents. The main focus of workshops conducted by facilitators is to promote family reading: adults (parents or caregivers) reading books together with children. Adults read books aloud to demonstrate that reading is for pleasure and they also emphasize opportunities for discussing the books they read together. So far, 12,284 parents have participated in the workshops, of whom 4,842 are men and 7,442 are women.

## Method

The purpose of this study is to explore the role of the Reading for Children project (RfC) in promoting reading, and identify if RfC has had any impact on language and literacy skills of pre-school and primary school aged children (Cohen & Manion, 1997).

## Site and Sampling Selection

Out of total 66 villages where RfC project operates, 13 villages were selected. Purposive sampling was used considering the following criteria: settings from different provinces and districts; from each year of establishment (see table below), and ensuring a mix of community and school-based libraries (Glesne, 1999). These 13 villages with PRCs will be called in this report "target villages". In addition, two villages (Jangy-Turmush and Kabyk both in Alai district) where the RfC project does not yet function were also included in the sample to be able to compare and contrast the findings from the RfC project villages. These 2 villages will be called

“comparison villages”. There were 12 female and one male librarian in these libraries, with work experience of between 3 and 37 years. From these 13 PRCs, 13 facilitators (1 per PRC) were interviewed.

From the total 15 villages (both where RfC functions and does not function), 286 parents were selected to complete the survey questionnaire, out of whom 246 were from RfC target villages and 40 were from non-RfC villages. Out of 246 parents from the RfC villages, 137 had attended RfC training and 109 had not attended any training yet. 130 of the 246 RfC village parents also participated in focus group discussions.

The following figure demonstrates the age distribution of the 286 parents who participated in this study.

Figure 1: Respondents according to their age distribution

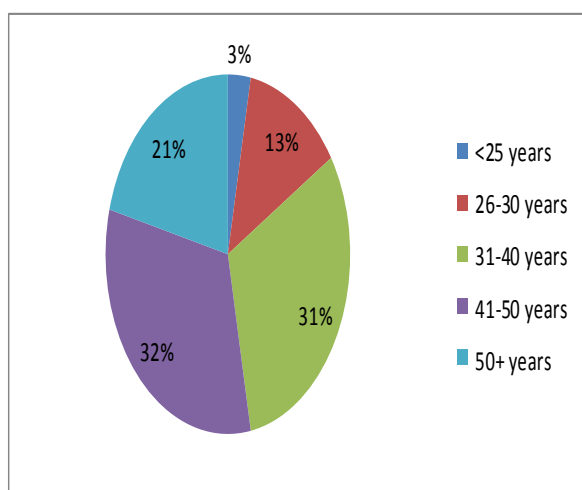


Figure 1 shows that most parents/caregivers are between 31 and 50 years (63%) while 21% are over 50 years old. The respondents over 50 years old are often grandparents or aunts or uncles of children, indicating that an important proportion of children are being raised by older caregivers who are not their parents.

The occupational backgrounds of the parents and caregivers are as follows. From the 13 target villages, 27% are school teachers, 25% are housewives, 15% are unemployed and 20% are pensioners. The remaining parents work as traders, farmers, village government workers. 30% of them have university education, 23% completed specialized vocational education and 41% are secondary school graduates. The remaining respondents have incomplete secondary education.

The figure below shows the differences between the respondents from target and control villages in terms of their educational backgrounds. Although more parents from the sample in target villages have university education, the combined total of post-secondary education (specialized vocational education and university level) is 53% for the target villages and 63% for the comparison villages. 6% of the target village sample and 16% of the comparison group had not completed secondary education. Overall levels of education were slightly higher in the target group, given the higher percentage of university education in those villages. This could have affected the findings, and should be better controlled in future studies.

The 246 parents from RfC project villages who participated in the study, had 551 children under 12 years old, of whom 283 are girls (51%) and 268 (49%) are boys. Focus group discussions were conducted with 282 of these children (138 girls and 144 boys).

### Data Collection

Survey questionnaires were conducted with parents / caregivers to find out about the following: a) their views on family reading, and b) parents/ caregivers' and children's activities related to reading. Respondents from target villages were also asked about their views on the training of RfC.

Interviews, thirteen facilitators (1 from each target village) were interviewed. They were asked about the effects of RfC and trainings for parents and caregivers, and whether they had observed any significant changes in family reading since the inception of the project.

Focus group discussions were conducted with 282 children (138 girls and 144 boys). 26 FGDs were conducted with children of trained parents: two FGDs in each village, one with pre-school (5-6 years old) children and one with primary school (7-9 years old) children. In total 282 children participated in FGDs of whom 138 were girls and 144 were boys. 130 out of the 246 RfC village parents also participated in focus group discussions: 13 FGDs with 10 participants in each village.

## Results and Discussion

### Increase Access to Age-appropriate Reading Materials

The study findings demonstrated that RfC has been successful in increasing access to age-appropriate reading materials in 13 villages in the sample. Before RfC was launched, three PRCs did not have books at all, while the remaining 10 PRCs had 287,700 books, and out of which a village library of Kara-Kulja 75% books of the total (216,300). Kara-Kulja library is a big central district library, while other 12 libraries are small village libraries. Arguably, Kara-Kulja library is one of the best libraries in the province in terms of its supply of books according to the AKF MSDSP education specialist. The remaining nine PRCs had from 1,500 to 9,000 books each. Only a small portion (8 to 1,500) of those books were children's books, and even those books were outdated and of not the best quality.

Focus groups with parents from both RfC and non-RfC villages showed the differences

between the number of books available at home. Thus, 68% of parents from RfC villages have up to 50 books at home, while 34% of the parents from non-RfC villages have up to 50 books at home. It can be inferred that the larger number of books at home in target villages is associated with RfC activities to encourage reading at home. About 10% of parents from both RfC and non-RfC villages do not have any books at home.

*Physical condition:* PRCs' physical condition and their atmosphere have a direct impact on the use of them. Better conditions in the libraries are more attractive to users and therefore encourage readers more.

The friendliness of librarians and RfC facilitators is particularly critical. Researcher observed that the librarians in all the sample settings (only Kurshab librarian was an exception) were trying hard to improve the library environment. Thus, a librarian in Kara-Kulja PRC was observed reading aloud a fairy tale to several children who were actively listening to her. A librarian in Alai district demonstrated all the collection of children's work (pictures, craftwork). She mentioned that previously the children would come to check out school textbooks only, but since the librarian has decorated the PRC and arranged books in an organized manner, the children now like to come and use the library more frequently.

*Documentation:* In 62% of libraries (eight out of 13), the required documentation is kept (library use instructions, a registration log, and reader's record cards). Documentation was part of the training of the RfC facilitators and is important in a library.

The librarians keep attendance records which categorize readers by age, gender, and whether readers have been trained under the RfC project. The following are verbatim comments

of the librarians based on their attendance records. “110-115 readers come to the library every month.”; “Adults are rare guests here – 1-2 people a day; 20 children come here daily.”; “Children didn’t have an opportunity to come here due to the problems with heating.”; “We had 293 library users in March”; “Pupils come the most often, and girls come more often than boys.”; “Third and fourth graders come most often.”; “High school pupils often come to get Aitmatov’s books and encyclopedias.”; “Parents come to check out books for their 5-6 year old children”. The analysis of the attendance records showed that most users are middle aged and older mothers or grandmothers who often come with their children. Children of primary graders are also frequent users of libraries.

*Public awareness:* The librarians are expected to conduct public awareness activities to inform people about the work of PRCs and to promote RfC (i.e., to attract children and parents to read books). Seven out of 13 libraries scored the maximum 8 points. Other libraries also scored high (6 or 7 out of 8), except the Kurshab library (scored 4 out of 8), in which the librarian did not do good job of raising community awareness.

*Events:* All 13 PRCs in the sample have detailed descriptions of past and future events and activities. The lists of events show that the libraries function well, reviving the functions of a village or province library that have been lost in the past years. The libraries are often the main resource for the community, serve as important centers for social and cultural activities for children, youth and adults. Researcher observed that the PRCs had plans with thematic albums and posters created by school children (e.g. “A book is my friend”), children’s drawings are collected and held in the libraries. Parents in FGDs mentioned the events conducted by the staff of PRCs in their villages. The respondents mentioned the following events organized in

PRCs: a book festival “Family Reading”, drawing contest of the books’ main characters, contest of recitation of Manas and many others. The PRCs also organized such celebrations as the Children’s Protection Day, International Women’s Day, the Day of Books, Nooruz and others.

### Role of Facilitators

The role of facilitators is critical in promoting RfC goals. In each village there are several facilitators. Some work as librarians and others are school teachers. These facilitators recognize their responsibilities and their descriptions included: “I spread the ideas of family reading because it is important”; “My job is to provide access to books”; “My role is to help in increasing children’s interest in books”.

A facilitator in Alai district, who is also a member of village council, illustrates very successful work. She has organized a puppet theater at her own expense, and she had children make puppets with their own hands. Then, she and children organized theatrical performances on the basis of books they read from PRCs. Every summer, she goes to *jailoo* (summer highland pasture) with her family and she takes books with her to establish a pasture PRC. All the children from the nearby pastures come to borrow books from her. This facilitator observed, “I am a village council deputy and I care for my fellow villagers. Each family in our village has livestock at home and I sometimes feel that animals get more attention than the children. Children spend much time looking after animals. Therefore, I try to speak out that children should read books and get good education”.

### Use of PRCs

It is important that many parents and their children visit PRCs. In the RfC villages, 76% of the parents, who were surveyed, mentioned that

they regularly visit PRCs, and 67% of them borrow books for their children. About one fourth of the parents and children also spend time in the library reading books. About half of the parents in the sample stated that they visit the library once a week or once every two weeks.

The parents in the sample shared their attitudes towards the PRCs. They were asked to rate their attitudes towards the PRCs according to the following criteria and they were asked to mark on 5 point scale (maximum is 5). The parents rated as follows: PRC provides a variety of reading materials (4.18 out of 5), they like visiting library (4.20 out of 5), their child visits library with pleasure (4.28 out of 5), PRC helps them to read more with their children at home (4.20 out of 5), a librarian helps a child to choose a book (4.21 out of 5), and they started to read more frequently since the PRC has been established (4.29 out of 5), and the total aggregated score was 4.20 out of 5, which is very positive.

The librarians also noted that the parents started to visit library more frequently since the PRCs have been established. A librarian in Naryn district stated, "The Aga Khan Foundation has restored our past tradition of reading culture. We started reading more with our children. This work should be continued because our children need that". Another parent in Alai district stated: "There is nothing else in our village. The PRC is very nice. There are beautiful and useful books in it. We can now check out books for our children in Kyrgyz". Another parent in Kara-Kulja added, "Without a PRC, our children would read only school textbooks".

Almost all sampled parents who were trained by RfC and their children, visit the library on regular basis. In libraries established in 2010 and 2011 about 90% of trained parents included in the study, and 70% of their children,

visit the library. This is a very high indicator given that it is unrealistic to expect that all 100% of parents visit the library on regular basis. In the PRCs established in 2009, around 65% of trained parents who answered the questionnaire and over 40% of their children reported visiting the library. This may be because not enough new reading materials and books were provided by MSDSP to the libraries established in 2009.

It is interesting to see the number of untrained parents who also visit PRCs. Thus, in PRCs established in 2010, 80% of untrained parents included in the study, and 55% of children of untrained parents visited libraries. While in the PRCs established in 2011, around 70% of untrained parents and over 60% of children of untrained parents visit libraries. In comparison, 60% of the untrained parents and 50% of children of untrained parents visit libraries established in 2007, and around 35% of trained parents and 40% of children of untrained parents visit libraries established in 2008. A very low percentage of untrained parents (30%) and their children (18%) visited libraries established in 2009. The above indicates that training improves the level of attendance at the library. However, access to good books, as shown in the PRCs established in 2010 and 2011, can also attract parents who have not yet attended any training.

The study also showed that the number of books in the PRCs were limited, and therefore in some villages parents and their children have completed reading the available books already. Some FGD participants stated, "All the books from the Aga-Khan Foundation [in the PRC] have been read, there is nothing else to read in Kyrgyz." Thus, it is necessary to continue with the provision of new books and attract interest of local communities and gain support from the local governments to supply PRCs with new books. These trends show that it is critical to



provide new books to libraries to maintain the interest of parents at high level.

The study showed a high percentage of children who visit and use libraries. According to the survey conducted with parents who participated in RfC trainings about 75% of their children visit the library on a regular basis. Children of pre-school level attend the library with their parents or caregivers or they are brought books from the library by older brothers or sisters. 53.4% of pre-school level children use the libraries on regular basis. In comparison, a great majority (95%) of the respondents in villages where there are no PRCs reported that their children do not go to the library, and the main reason for this is the lack of children's books there. The parents from non-RfC villages stated that there are books from the old Soviet period in the libraries which are not attractive to children. In the two villages where RfC did not yet function, 47.5% of the parents responded that their children did not read at all. They stated the lack of story books as the main reason for that.

Many parents were concerned that their children often liked to watch TV (e.g. cartoons or children's movies), and therefore they were not interested in reading books. After the parents attended trainings of RfC, around 35% of the children stated they choose books over watching TV, while around 25% mentioned that watching TV is better than reading books. Around 40% could not make choice between reading books and watching TV, and that they like both of them equally.

The study findings show that the RfC project has substantially increased access to reading materials. These efforts have impacted on the family reading culture in the villages. Both parents and their children in target villages take great interest in reading together and visiting PRC on a regular basis.

## Promote Enjoyable Reading Experiences

One of the main goals of RfC is to promote enjoyable reading experiences between parents and children. In ideal family reading, parents or adult members of the family need to read aloud for fun and also create opportunities for questions, discussion and dialogue. To promote enjoyable reading experiences between parents and children, facilitators plan and conduct many activities including trainings for parents on family reading. In this study, out of 246 parents from RfC villages, 137 had attended family reading training. Of these 137 parents, 82% said that they participated in training because of their interest.

Thus, the parents really like the training in which they participated. In FGDs, some parents mentioned that they were initially reluctant to come to trainings. Some thought they would not learn anything and it would be just a waste of time. Others felt that they were busy with their household and other activities. However, after attending a few sessions, they started taking great interest and they also started to realize the importance of the training.

In the survey questionnaire, 79 (64%) of respondents out of 137 trained parents indicated that their children had increased their interest in reading. The parents said that their children request their parents to bring books for them from the library and to read books at home. Also, 78 parents (57%) noted that they discuss books with their children.

Due to the activities of the RfC, most children started to visit the PRC on regular basis and they also ask their parents to buy more books and ask them to read books. These children take a great interest in reading books. Parents say they can express their thoughts better and use new words in their speech, and ultimately they also do better at school.

As mentioned earlier, 137 out of 246 parents from RfC villages have participated in RfC training, while 109 did not. The study showed that 43% of the parents who participated in trainings mentioned that their children read 3-5 times a week, while 23% of them also said that their children read every day. In comparison, 38% of the parents who did not participate in the training (41 out of 109 parents) indicated that their children read 3-5 times a week 19% said that their children read every day.

The study also showed that girls were more active than boys in reading activities. They were more interested than boys in reading books. A facilitator in Naryn district said, "Girls read more than boys in our village. Boys like to play and run around". A librarian in the same village commented, "In primary school, both boys and girls read well, but in secondary and high schools, girls read more while boys are attracted more to computer games or outdoor games". Girls also come to PRCs more frequently than boys.

### **Influence towards Children's Language Skills and Performance at School**

The study also showed that the children who participated in this project significantly improved their language skills (reading and speaking), which in turn impacted their performance at school. Almost all sampled parents stated that their children became more motivated to do their school tasks. The children who regularly visited the library, later continued to read books when they went back to schools. Over 75% of parents in the target villages mentioned that children in RfC villages have developed an interest in reading and thus they started to read more at home when they prepared their school home tasks. Out of 137 parents trained by RfC, 90% responded in the survey that their children started performing

better at school. Better school performance is not an explicit aim of RfC, so this finding provides anecdotal evidence of a welcome unintended consequence.

### **Strengthen Family Bonds**

RfC aims to strengthen interactions and family bonds between parents or caregivers and children. It was hoped that by encouraging parents and other adults in the family to spend more time with their children by reading and discussing books would help them to make closer family bonds. RfC also aimed to promote oral storytelling in families, i.e. parents and grandparents tell stories to their children. Plus, children and their parents were encouraged to participate in storytelling and recitation of *Manas* (a tradition epic poem of the Kyrgyz people) during PRC hold events such as Festival of Books and others.

Almost half of the trained parents (48%) mentioned that they noticed changes in their children and said that their children have become friendlier and they respect their parents more. Even fathers noted that they became closer to their children after attending trainings. One trained mother observed, "Reading together brings family members together, it unites us". Another mother added, "I now try to read to my child all the time, for example if my child asks me to read when I am in a hurry to go to a party, I still read a book and then go". Another trained mother observed, "When we read a book together, I notice that we are together. I noticed that I became closer to my own children". One more parent added, "I now read books for my children".

The children of the trained parents reported in FGDs that they read books together with their parents. One of them said "we read books sitting side by side". Another child said, "I like when my mother reads to me in the yard under the sun". Another child added, "My mother

often reads to me, and I like to discuss with her, and we often talk about what we read". The children also mentioned that they now started to read books more than watch TV. Many children and their parents spend much time watching TV rather than reading books. However, after attending RfC trainings, many parents now prefer to read books with their children over spending time in front of TV.

It was especially interesting to note the participation of male parents (fathers and grandfathers) in reading activities of RfC. For example, one trained father observed, "I have changed a lot after the training. The training helped us understand that the father also should read books and spend time with their children. I always thought that it was only mother's job. In the past, when the children asked me to read, I used to tell them to go and ask their mother to read for them, but now I read books for my children with pleasure". Another trained father added, "I had no interest to read for my children. I thought that reading was something done by a mother or children themselves. I participated in the training and understood the role of family reading; the facilitators were stronger and smarter than us. Now, I am convinced that I need to spend more time with my children and reading for them is important". One child said in FGD, "I like to listen to my father when he reads a book".

## Conclusion

Parents' involvement in reading tasks can help develop their children's interest in reading. The study demonstrated that RfC increased access to children's age-appropriate reading materials, promoted enjoyable reading experiences between parents and children, and strengthened family bonds between parents and their children by establishing PRCs and conducting series of trainings on family reading.

In addition, there were indications that the RfC had also positively influenced the children's attitude towards education and performance at school.

Based on the positive results of the RfC project, it is recommended that the Ministry of Education and Science (MOES) of the Kyrgyz Republic introduce family reading nation-wide by integrating the family reading training modules into the national pre-service and in-service teacher training courses for pre-school and primary school teachers (Fullan & Miles, 1992).

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