UNLOCKING LITERACY
Navigating Parental Engagement with Worldreader's BookSmart in Kenya
Globally, just one-third of 10-year-olds can read and understand basic written stories, with two-thirds below minimum proficiency. Since its inception in 2010, Worldreader has embarked on a mission to encourage children to read, supporting over 22 million readers across more than 100 countries. Using its signature digital platform, BookSmart, Worldreader enhances reading, social-emotional and digital literacy skills through culturally and linguistically relevant digital books and engaging activities.

In 2021, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent school closures, the organization shifted from school-based programs to directly supporting reading in the home using mobile technology. This article highlights emerging findings and implications of Raising Readers, a two-year study — conducted by ODI in partnership with Worldreader, and supported by the EdTech Hub. This study aimed at exploring questions about the optimal ways to work with parents and caregivers when introducing a digital reading platform and what best supports children’s reading.

Raising Readers tested a set of behavior change strategies aimed at parents and children, ranging from low to high-intensity interventions or modalities. These included digital messaging, teacher-assigned reading, parental training, and shared reading sessions, which were developed and tested for their ability to enhance parent-child reading engagement. The study involved 12 schools and approximately 1,800 third-grade students in peri-urban schools and communities outside Nairobi, Kenya. The first phase of the research focused on co-designing and creating the modalities with school communities, while the second phase examined the impact of those modalities on parents and children. Building on lessons from the first design-based research phase, this article sets out learnings from the second phase, which employed a mixed methods approach with quasi-experimental elements.
Parents hold the keys to accessing and using digital reading tools like BookSmart.

Using their phones, data, and commitment, parents from the 12 sample schools received an initial orientation and ongoing support via one of the engagement modalities being tested, alongside control schools where only the orientation was provided.

From the start, the project resulted in a **nearly fivefold increase in children's likelihood to voluntarily read**, emphasizing the importance of early exposure to digital reading tools, irrespective of engagement methods. Moreover, **parents engaged with the app were 5.18 times more likely to notice improvements in their children's reading**, suggesting that this engagement can lead to a heightened awareness of their children's literacy development. These figures highlight not only the potential for apps like BookSmart to directly impact children's reading habits but also their ability to enhance parents' recognition and valuation of reading at home.

This shift in awareness, knowledge, and practices among those who had contact with the app at various levels is particularly promising, indicating the potential of even brief exposure to digital reading resources to positively influence parental attitudes and behaviors towards reading. This increase in reading awareness among parents is a critical step toward establishing a culture of reading at home.
Unbeknownst to the project, the initial half-day orientation introducing the BookSmart app, digital literacy training, and emphasizing the importance of reading had the most substantial impact on engaging parents. Subsequent interventions, although designed to deepen engagement, attracted significantly fewer parents and did not create a statistically significant boost in engagement compared to control schools that received only the initial training. While additional inputs like digital messaging and parent training showed minor improvements in app usage (.03 and .09 respectively), teacher-assigned reading (.70) and shared reading sessions (.26) suggested a potential for higher engagement, albeit not reaching statistical significance.

This outcome was both enlightening and challenging, suggesting that the foundation laid by a single, well-conducted training session is important but that further engaging parents over 12 weeks may prove too challenging. This prompted Worldreader to re-examine strategies, reaffirming the importance of the quality of initial exposure over the quantity of subsequent interventions. Additionally, attendance barriers experienced by parents led to a reexamination of how to generate lighter, faster, and more community and digital-led support for parents that require less parental in-person contact.
The teacher-assigned reading modality showed greater promise than other interventions to help drive parental engagement in supporting children’s reading, as shown in the data above.

While not statistically significant, this is a valuable insight to consider. Teachers demonstrated remarkable flexibility in implementing teacher-assigned reading strategies, organizing BookSmart sessions before and after school to ensure inclusivity, and bridging the digital gap during shared reading activities. Their proactive approach emphasizes the importance of school-based support in inclusive parental behavior change. Additionally, teachers are powerful influencers in reading adoption in the home.

In parallel, school leaders played a pivotal role in fostering literacy-friendly environments by strategically aligning the curriculum with regular reading goals, facilitating specific reading times in school libraries, and providing technological support such as Wi-Fi hotspots and data bundles for teachers during the research. These collaborative efforts among teachers and school leaders were not in the research design, but emerged through teachers’ initiatives, highlighting the importance of trusted school actors in strengthening the uptake of new tools for parental reading with children.
Despite the proximity to Nairobi, an increase in EdTech familiarity in Kenya post-COVID, and school leader/teacher support, significant barriers hindered access and use of BookSmart in the low-resource communities in this study. Most families in the study, 80.6%, live on less than US $150 per month, categorizing them as low-income and restricting their access to devices and data. Many are migrant workers juggling multiple jobs. While 65.2% of caregivers surveyed own a smartphone, potentially enabling direct access to the BookSmart app, some 34.8% lacked personal smartphones, relying instead on the shared devices of extended family members or neighbors. Regular access to data and limited connectivity further complicated regular access for many parents over the 12 weeks. Only 14.9% of caregivers had Wi-Fi in the home, and reliance on mobile data exacerbated intermittent access issues and made consistent reading a challenge for families despite the benefits.

Despite BookSmart's adaptability across devices and offline reading capabilities, limited device ownership and reliance on data hindered continuous use by families as intended. This challenges the capacity of digital reading tools to engage all parents equally across diverse settings.
The Raising Readers project has yielded valuable insights into the benefits and potential challenges of using digital reading tools in the home to enhance literacy in Kenya. In response to the research, Worldreader is working to further remove barriers. A new partnership with Safaricom is a pivotal step towards addressing data affordability and connectivity challenges, offering over 2,000 Kenyan families free access to the BookSmart app without data charges. This collaboration not only mitigates one of the significant barriers to digital reading but also exemplifies the power of strategic partnerships in expanding EdTech’s reach.

The Raising Readers research brings increasing clarity to the importance of an ecosystem approach in addressing educational inequities and realizing the potential of new learning tools to parents in the home. Meaningfully delivering on the promise of new EdTech tools for all, including the most marginalized, will require effort and inclusivity that encompasses not just schools, but also the parents with whom children interact and learn with daily. Even when taking advantage of new technologies, a holistic approach to learning remains key to moving the needle on the literacy and reading needs of children.