



**Building Dynamic Learning  
Communities to Address Learning Loss**  
*A Pilot Study in Sierra Leone*

July, 2022

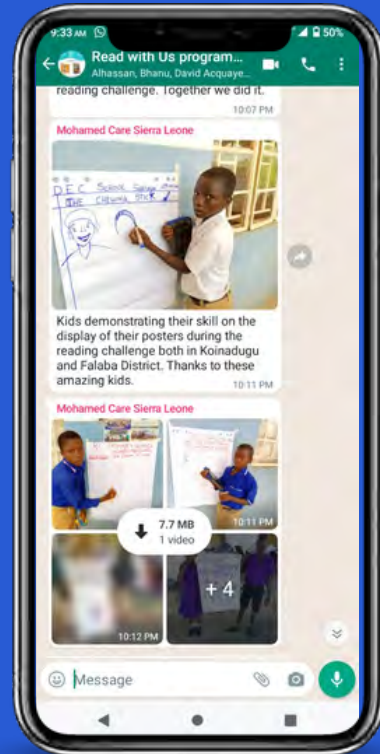
## Overview

Like many children around the globe, students in rural Sierra Leone are struggling with learning loss caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. These students risk dropping out of school and falling behind permanently. So how do we guarantee that these children regain their lost learning? It's not enough for them to play catchup in school.

Instead, the Read with Us pilot revealed an innovative way to promote reading by creating a dynamic learning community to support children. As part of the pilot, children received access to digital books via tablets in after-school reading clubs. But it was the dynamic learning environment that formed across the 12 reading clubs, which proved to have the biggest influence on enthusiasm to read more, ultimately helping children boost their learning.

This begs the question: what were the ingredients that led to increased time spent reading amongst the students and how can we build dynamic learning communities at scale to tackle learning loss?

**This is what progress looks like**



# The global challenge: Learning poverty is expected to increase substantially due to Covid-19.

## Before the pandemic



## Since the pandemic



## The implications

Learning poverty was already excessively high before the pandemic: with 53% of children in low- and middle-income countries suffering from “learning poverty.”

Now, 7 in 10 children in low- and middle-income countries are expected to be learning-poor due to school closures and ineffective remote learning during the pandemic (World Bank 2021\*).

Already strained schools and education systems will not be able to make up for lost classroom time during regular school hours.

**Innovative solutions will be essential to closing the educational learning gap.**



## In Sierra Leone, the situation is particularly dire



### A challenged education system

Sierra Leone ranked 138th out of 181 countries on the 2020 Global Youth Development Index



### Lack of access to reading

Remote schools in Sierra Leone lack access to relevant reading materials



### Weak digital connectivity

Most schools in Sierra Leone lack digital connectivity, limiting access to digital resources & communication

## Our aim: to build a culture of reading in the community



Improved time spent reading



An improved culture of reading



Improved reading club attendance



# Our approach: increase engagement with reading with resources, support, and coaching

The pilot brought digital reading to children across 12 after-school reading clubs

**Who:** 390 pupils across 12 schools

**What:** A holistic reading experience starting on shared tablets for offline student reading and accompanied by weekly book engagement activities sent by reading club facilitators through WhatsApp communities.

**When:** October 2021 – April 2022

**Where:** Koinadugu and Falaba Districts, Sierra Leone

**In partnership with:**



# The results: before and after the Read with Us intervention

## Students

### Before: Reading is solitary and passive

- Students arrive at the book club
- Pick a book with the support of teachers
- Students read by themselves
- Once they were finished reading, they leave



### After: Reading becomes engaging and bonding

- Students read the Weekly Book together as a group, with the teachers
- They discuss the contents of the book together
- They do engaging activities inspired by the book
- The activities are shared with other reading clubs



**53+**

minutes of daily average reading time between October 2021 and May 2022

**2h 23m**

highest daily average reading time reached during the pilot

**2,555**

total number of books read in full by students during the pilot period (nearly 1,500 more were partially read)

## Teachers

### Before: Support and participation is limited to each individual reading club

- Teachers help children choose their books
- They give support on an ad-hoc basis
- They have no established way of sharing learnings or challenges with other teachers



### After: Support and participation spans across 12 reading clubs

- Teachers participate fully in the reading session
- They receive weekly books, tips and activities via Whatsapp to keep the children reading and engaged
- They are part of a virtual community of other teachers, head teachers, and key stakeholders. In this virtual community there were:

**33**  
members

**600+**  
photos shared

**60+**  
videos shared

**Daily**  
engagement



*"Kids demonstrating their skill on the display of their posters during the reading challenge both in Koinadugu and Falaba District. Thanks to these amazing kids."*

- Mohammed, teacher

## The community

As part of the Read with Us pilot we organized a reading challenge for the students. The main goal of this challenge was to further engage the community, particularly parents, around the positive benefits of reading, as well as celebrate the students' reading accomplishments. Nine schools and their pupils stepped up to join the competition.

The challenge comprised:

- **A read-aloud challenge:** students were asked to read their favorite book in front of an audience of peers, teachers, parents, and community members. Judges awarded prizes to students for reading with clarity, smoothness, and obeying punctuation marks.
- **A tour of the students' presentations:** students explained each book's main events, the impact the book had on them, and displayed their art projects. Some students drew a picture of the book's setting or their favorite character, while others wrote a poem related to the book. Judges then awarded prizes for the most creative artwork and best oral presentations.
- **A live storytelling and performance session:** students dramatized their favorite books. Performances included drumming, dancing, or silent acting as a reader narrated. Parents were encouraged to watch the live performances, and judges awarded prizes to the most creative interpretations.

Winners of the challenge share what the experience meant to them:

### Mary F. Marah, 9 years old

"*The Color of Love* is the book I read for the reading challenge. It teaches you about love and unity. I feel very proud and happy about winning first position. Right now, I'm most excited about having access to reading."



### Mustapha Massaquoi, 9 years old

"I chose to read the book *Mary Plants a Tree* for the reading challenge. It taught me about the impact of nature. It was hard to win the challenge amongst other brilliant readers, and I was excited all through when I was chosen."





# Our process: four steps to success

## STEP 1

Expand access to books and connectivity



- Digital library of books
- Tablets
- Mobile phones
- Modem in classrooms
- Sim card in tablets

## STEP 2

Structure the act of reading and make it engaging



- Book of the week
- Reading activities with each book
- Reading tips
- 21st century book themes

## STEP 3

Involve key stakeholders



- Teachers
- Head teachers
- Parents
- Deputy directors

## STEP 4

Create a virtual learning community



- Connecting teachers and leaders virtually via a whatsapp channel to support coaching and boost participation



# These steps were designed to achieve behavior change

To build a culture of reading, you need to build a habit of reading. And building a habit of reading requires behavior change. From irregular or non-existent reading to daily reading. While we're trying to build a habit of reading amongst children, it's interesting to consider everyone who is involved in making that happen.

## For behavior change to be done right, it needs to be approached strategically – let's take a closer look

### First, let's consider the target audience




This can be broken down into:

- Primary: Those whose behavior you are trying to change
- Influencers: Those that can influence the primary audience
- Gatekeepers: Those that can facilitate or prevent access to the primary audience

### Who is the audience for this pilot?

- Primary: Children
- Influencers: Teachers at the reading club
- Gatekeepers: Parents, schools, deputy directors

### What behavior are we trying to change amongst these audiences?

Audience		Desired behavior
Children		Develop a daily habit of reading
Teachers at the reading clubs		Create an inspiring and supportive learning environment
Parents		Allow children to attend after school reading clubs and start reading with their children

## What are their motives and barriers to participation?

Understanding what motivates these audiences and what prevents them from taking action is an essential part of achieving success with an intervention such as Read with Us.

- Motivations: reasons the audience would take action to improve the reading culture in the community
- Barriers: things that stand in the way of the audience changing their behavior around building a reading culture

### Audience

### Motivations

### Barriers

#### Children

**External:** Want to improve their reading and succeed in school

**Internal:** Want to connect with other students, want to make their teachers and parents proud

**External:** Lack guidance and support to develop the necessary reading habit

**Internal:** Lack the environment to connect with students and the stage to make teachers/parents proud

#### Teachers

**External:** Want their students to achieve in school

**Internal:** Want to feel a sense of achievement, feel a sense of belonging within the community, and that they are part of something bigger

**External:** Lack structure, understanding and inspiration of how to improve the reading habit

**Internal:** Aren't connected to the larger community, their efforts go unnoticed

#### Parents

**External:** Want their children to succeed in school and life

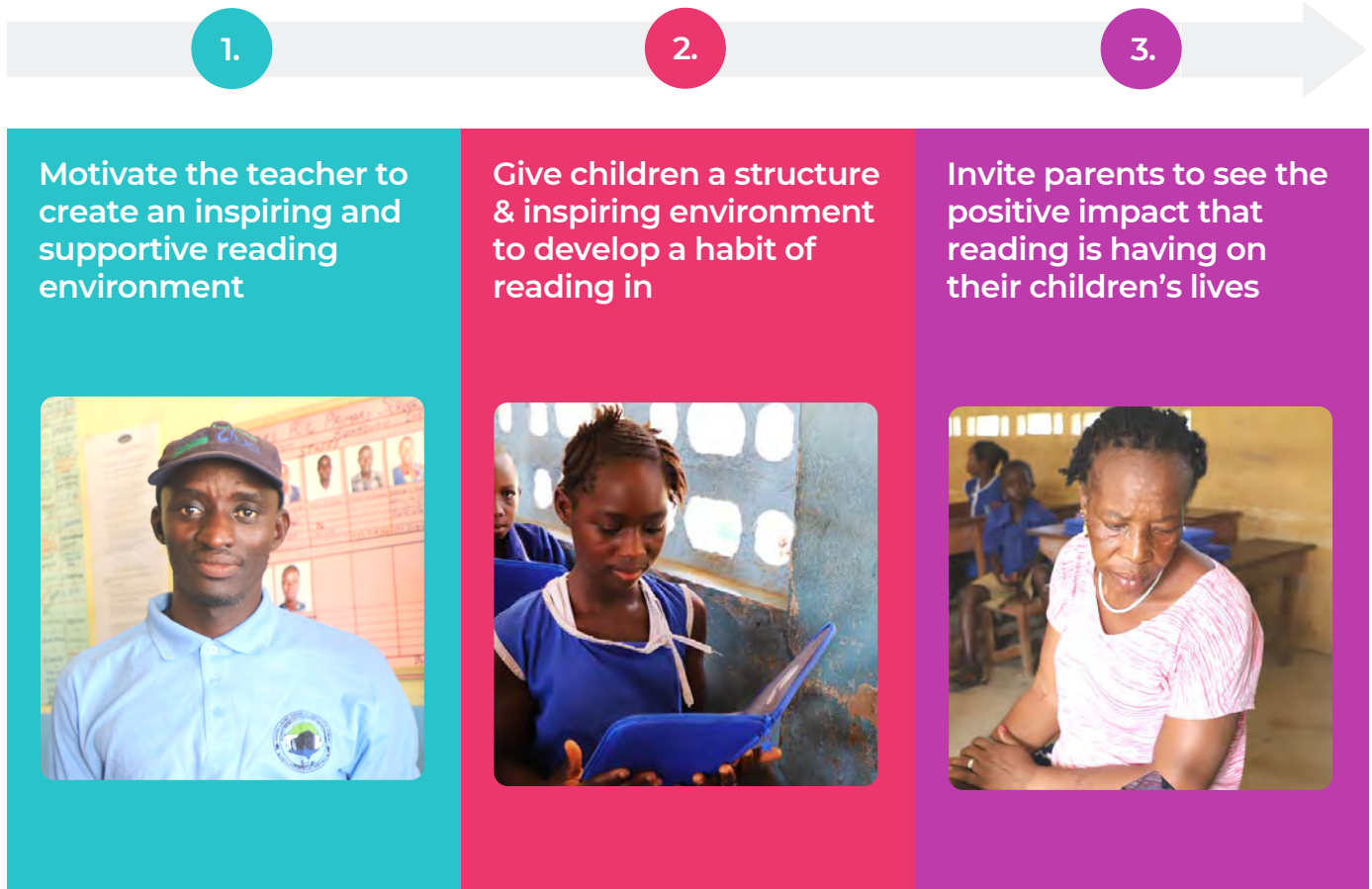
**Internal:** Want their children to be happy and thriving

**External:** Lack understanding of the value of reading

**Internal:** Haven't seen evidence of their children reading and the impact on their happiness/confidence

## So then, whose behavior do we need to change?

While every audience member's behavior requires changing in order to improve the culture of reading in the community, in this case we discovered that the most impact would be achieved if we focused on changing behavior amongst the teachers. This would indirectly impact behavior and attitudes of the children and parents.



## What are some key learnings of the pilot when it comes to behavior change?

### Step 1: Expand access to books and connectivity

#### **21st century learning increases enthusiasm amongst teachers and students**

The use of tablets in the classroom was new to both the teachers and students, and this led to both teachers and students being extremely excited about navigating and incorporating these devices. What's more, many of the teachers had never experienced using social emotional learning in the classroom – a theme they very much enjoyed exploring and applying during their sessions with the students.

## Step 2: Make reading structured and engaging

### Weekly books removed guess-work in forming positive habits

They say it takes 66 days for a new habit to form (Lally, P. et. al. 2009). Building a culture of reading comes down to habits, and forming habits comes down to pure repetition. Before the pilot, teachers lacked clear guidance on which books to read with their students. This would have caused decision fatigue, making it much harder to form a daily habit of reading. By providing teachers with books over the 6-month pilot we removed the guess-work, making it far easier for them to read with their students regularly. This in turn instilled a positive habit of reading amongst the children.

### One good habit turns into several

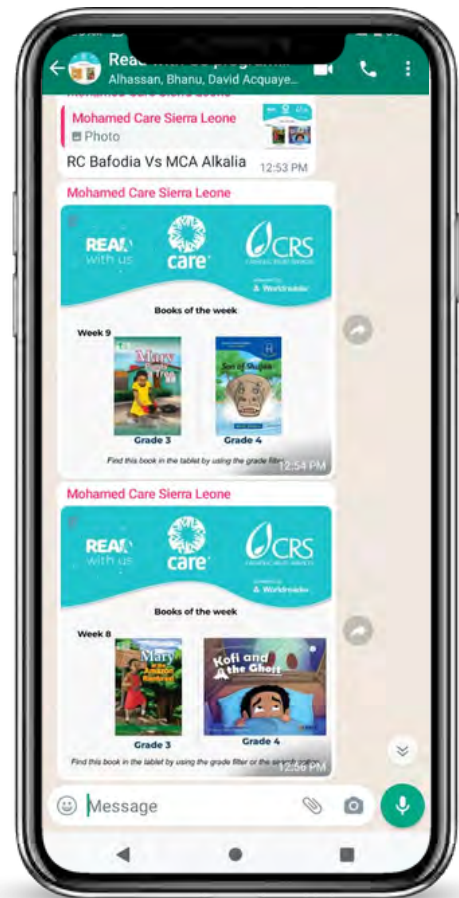
Each reading club was recommended one weekly book. However data shows that other books were also being read by the book clubs.

This shows that teachers and students started going beyond the requirements of the project.

This was also the case with sim cards. When the pilot launched we provided each teacher with a tablet that contained a sim card. This gave teachers the connectivity required to communicate amongst each other. What we saw was that once teachers got into the habit of using the sim card, they took the initiative to purchase their own sim cards so connectivity could continue to benefit the project and their lives.

### Activities act as rewards that fuel motivation

Achievement is one of the most powerful psychological driving factors of human behavior. Therefore, when you make students feel as though they've achieved something they're going to come back. Something as simple as making a child complete an activity after reading a book and sharing the activity with other students and teachers creates a milestone that helps students feel a sense of progress and pride as part of their reading journey. The same applies to teachers who share their students' achievements with other teachers.



## Book club discussions encourage critical and creative thinking

Today's learners require a learning environment which enhances creativity and engagement rather than conformity and compliance. During the reading sessions, students were asked to reflect on how they could apply the lessons from the story to their own lives, as well as how they would have behaved in certain situations. This teaches children that they have the power to address any challenges, if they look towards their inner strength.

### Step 3: Involve key stakeholders

#### Parental buy-in is essential

Prior to CARE and CRS' intervention in the community, many parents would not have allowed their children to attend after-school reading clubs. This is because it pulls children away from spending time on their family farm or at the marketplace. Without parents' consent for children to be reading in the reading clubs, the Read with Us pilot would have been impossible. In order to continue educating parents on the importance of reading, we organized a Reading Challenge as part of the pilot. This enabled parents to proudly witness the impact that reading was having on their children's life.

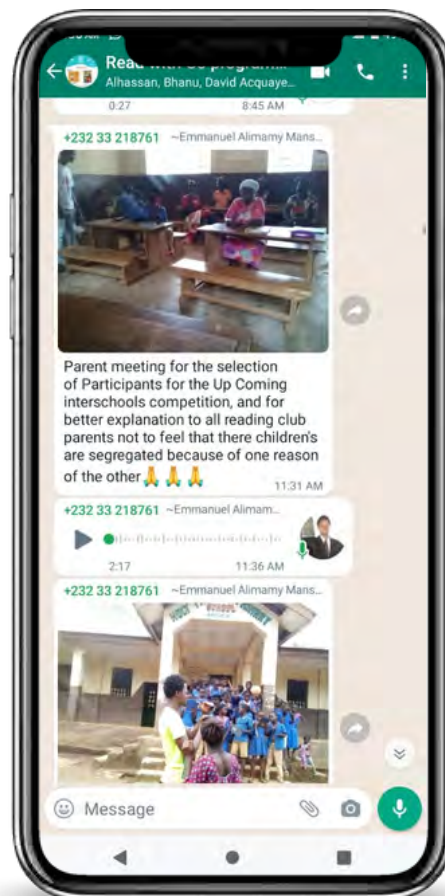
### Step 4: Create a virtual learning community

#### A teacher's environment shapes their behavior

It is well known that the people we surround ourselves with are the biggest influence on our behavior, attitudes and results. This became extremely obvious during the pilot when all teachers were connected via a virtual community on Whatsapp. This gave all of them the ability to witness how each teacher was participating and achieving milestones, positively impacting each individual teacher's desire to participate.

#### Being part of a team increases a teacher's loyalty to a project

If you can make teachers feel like part of a team or community on their journey, you'll create loyalty and a positive experience. Because of the virtual community, teachers felt that they were part of something bigger than themselves, and this increased their overall sense of purpose throughout the project.



# Looking forward

The Read with Us pilot demonstrates that it's possible to build a culture of reading amongst students when you build a dynamic and supportive learning environment.

Making books available is only the first step. What creates real behavior change is 1) delivering those books in a structured and engaging way through an organized reading schedule, and 2) making sure that the teachers in charge of leading those reading sessions feel supported and inspired on their journey.

As part of this pilot, the creation of a virtual community via Whatsapp proved to be extremely successful in doing both of these things in a simple and effective way.

The next step is to apply this approach at scale, so that more at-risk children can develop the reading habits required to overcome their learning loss to thrive in school and beyond.

