

## Researchers

Frances Aboud  
McGill University

Lia Fernald  
University of California, Berkeley

Pamela Jakiela  
Williams College

Heather Knauer  
University of Michigan

Owen Ozier  
Williams College

## Staff

Elyse Thulin  
Research Manager

## Timeline

2015-2020

## Study Status

Results

## Study Type

Randomized Evaluation

## Sample Size

357 caregivers and 510 children aged 2-6

## Research Implemented by IPA

Yes



### 1. Introduction

Poverty has significant and lasting consequences for children's cognitive and language development (Bosley & Conway, 2002; Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997). In low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), 43% of children under age five do not reach their developmental potential (Black *et al.*, 2017). Even in Kenya, one of the best-educated countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, only 30% of third graders can read at the second-grade level (Piper, 2010), and 34% of pre-school children are "on track" for language and numeracy development (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2017). The lack of adequate literacy preparation is a key risk factor for poor performance in primary school worldwide (Johansen *et al.*, 2005).

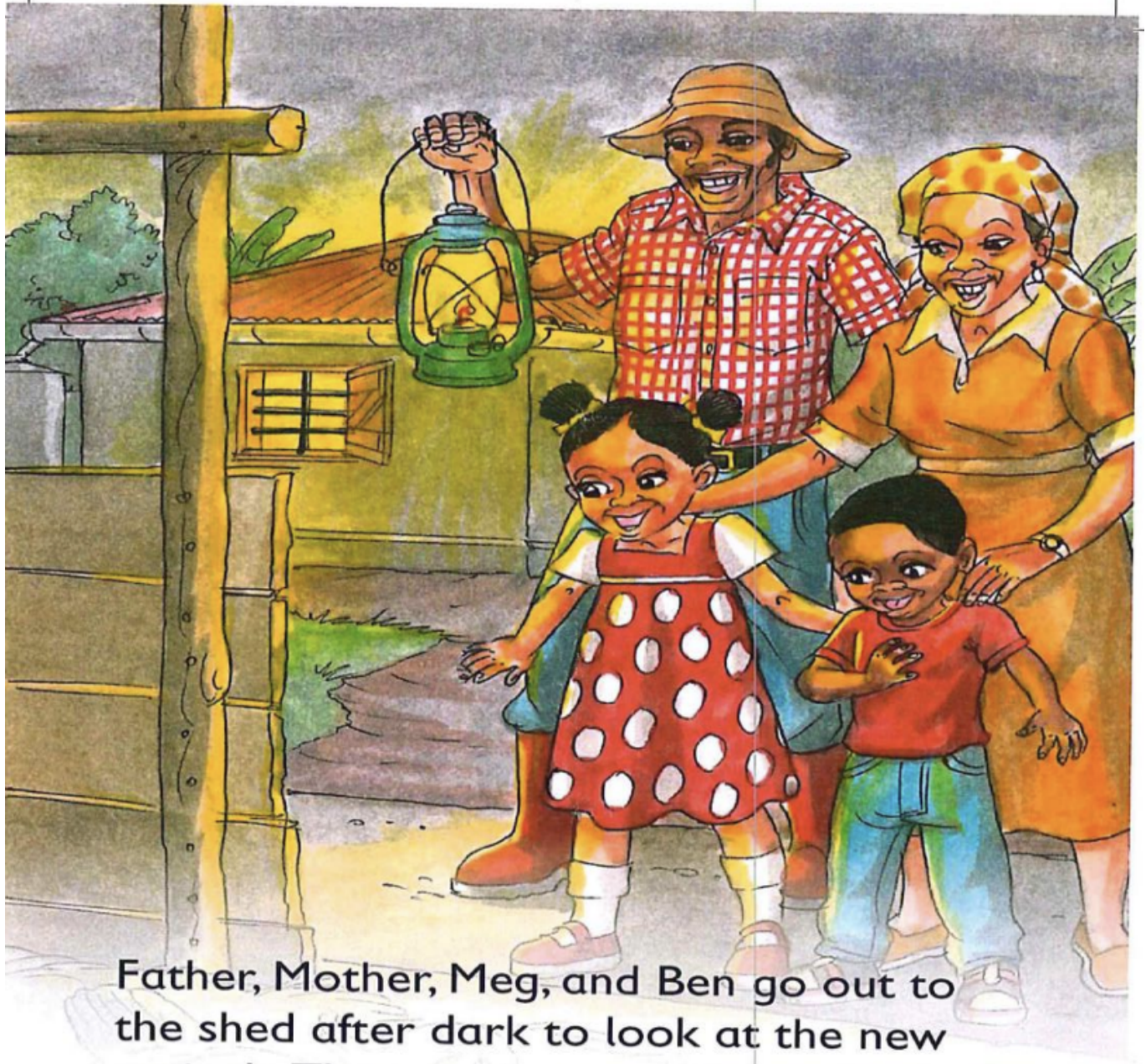
Over time, children living in poverty do not achieve their potential in terms of language development and emergent literacy is that they do not have access to linguistically stimulating home environments (Lee & Gershberg-Bloch, 2016). The availability of storybooks in the home and the quantity and quality of parents' reading engagements with their children are consistently associated with children's cognitive and language development, school readiness, and achievement (Kuker *et al.*, 2000; Park, 2000; Rodríguez *et al.*, 2009; Zacher, Thul, Mahoney, & Stapel-Wax, 2010). In particular, exposure to storybooks has a direct, positive, causal impact on children's vocabulary and language skills (Groppe & Sood, 2005).

In spite of the importance of books and parental engagement, 97% of households in Sub-Saharan Africa have two or fewer children's books, and only half of parents report having engaged in any cognitively stimulating activities with their young children in the last three days (United Nations Children's Fund, 2017). In some African contexts, responsive conversations between parents and their young children are actively discouraged by cultural norms

<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author at: 101B W. Green Hall, Mail Stop MCN 20-1, Washington, DC 20032, United States.  
E-mail address: ower@umich.edu (H. Knauer).

<sup>2</sup> Present address: University of Michigan, School of Social Work, United States.

## Storybooks Promote Early Childhood Literacy in Kenya



Father, Mother, Meg, and Ben go out to the shed after dark to look at the new arrivals. They are happy to have the duck family back.

*What is father holding?*

### In This Image

A storybook for young Kenyan children. Questions that the parents can address with their child are written in italics.

Storybooks and parental engagement are essential in building children's language and vocabulary skills, cognitive development, and school readiness. However, according to the United Nations, 97 percent of households in Sub-Saharan Africa have two or fewer children's books.[1] The lack of these resources may contribute to the region's low child literacy levels. Even in Kenya — one of Africa's best-educated countries — children have few opportunities for reading experiences outside of the classroom before they reach primary school, especially in rural areas. A 2011 survey in Kisumu County in western Kenya found that 84 percent of children under the age of five lived in homes without a single children's book.[2]

Researchers developed an intervention in Kisumu County to distribute storybooks to households and provide training to caregivers about how to engage with their children while reading. Households received six Kenyan books with text and colored pictures: two in English, two in Swahili, and two in the local language Luo. A total of 357 caregivers and 510 children aged 2-6 participated in the intervention. Outcomes of interest included children's language development skills and frequency of child-caregiver reading interactions.

Results showed that the distribution of storybooks and importantly training in how to talk about the story increased the likelihood of caregivers reading to their children and increased children's comprehension of the books. The caregiver training increased the frequency and quality of child-caregiver reading engagement as well as children's knowledge of book-related vocabulary words. Additional training did not have an impact on outcomes, however, indicating that one training session was sufficient to increase caregivers' engagement. While there were no overall differences in the intervention's effectiveness by caregiver literacy, children of illiterate caregivers experienced the largest increase in storybook-related expressive vocabulary.

## Sources

1. Keeley, Brian, and Céline Little. *The State of the Worlds Children 2017: Children in a Digital World*. UNICEF. 3 United Nations Plaza, New York, NY 10017, 2017.
2. Kenya National Bureau of Statistics and United Nations Children's Fund (2011). *Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2011, Nyanza Province*. Accessed at [microdata.worldbank.org/index.php/catalog/2660](http://microdata.worldbank.org/index.php/catalog/2660).

---

## Partners



**Moran Publishers**

March 06, 2023