

***Reading for Children***  
*Action Research for a  
Post-Literacy Intervention*

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In collaboration with Bangladesh Development Society (BDS) on behalf of ActionAid Bangladesh (AAB), Dhaka Ahsania Mission (DAM), Friends in Village Development Bangladesh (FIVDB) and Grameen Shikkha (GS).

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Save the Children USA  
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## Preface

“Once upon a time....”

For many of us, these words bring back joyful memories of childhood. We are reminded that the art of reading and telling stories is a gift that has tied generations together all across the world, and which has its roots in many cultural and social traditions.

Save the Children (USA) embarked on this Reading for Children research in Bangladesh in order to explore how we might utilize the age-old tradition of the story - in ways which would both help reinforce newly learned literacy skills of adult learners *and* create for small children a window into the world of books and reading.

We purposively carried out the research in partnership with agencies that utilized different literacy approaches – because we thought this variety of approaches would help us to discover and learn more – and also to test the robustness of the intervention under different circumstances.

For those engaged with the Reading for Children research there have been innumerable challenges and constraints, but also many discoveries and insights. We share all of these with you – and hope that in doing so all of us can continue the search for better ways to support girls and boys and men and women of Bangladesh in their struggle for a better life. We cannot say that Reading for Children “works”: that statement can be made only after more work to take the ideas to scale and more rigorous analysis of impact. We can say however that it seems to be an approach that is culturally acceptable, interesting for both children and adults, and supportive of both improved skills and an increased practice of reading.

Bangladesh faces a massive challenge to bring education and literacy skills to its people. We hope that this work makes a small contribution to our shared understanding of how to support newly literate men and women – and how to help them link newly acquired literacy to their everyday life and aspirations in useful and meaningful ways. Both within Bangladesh and internationally, we hope our findings and lessons learned help others too in the search for effective post-literacy interventions.

Helen Gallagher  
Bangladesh Field Office Director  
Save the Children, USA

September 8, 2001

## Acknowledgements

It has been a privilege to be involved with this research, the idea of which, when conceived, seemed such a simple and obvious contribution to the challenges development educationists have been facing and struggling to solve in regard to the sustainability of non formal education efforts and interventions in this country.

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At the implementation level, the research came to life through hard work and the dedication of 5 field coordinators, Ms. Jahanara Parvin (DAM), Mr. Hasan Ferdoush (GS), Mr. Gulam Mustafa (FIVDB), Ms. Mossammat Parvin Khanam (BDS), Mr. Saiful Islam (SC USA), our research assistant Ms. Masuda Khatun (SC USA), and 25 facilitators. It was mainly these people to whom the research owes much of its success.

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We are also thankful to Ms. Julee Allen, SC USA, for her support in finalizing this report.

We acknowledge the support of many others, all of whose names cannot be mentioned here, but whose assistance contributed to the accomplishment of the research in some way or the other and we thank them all.

-Talat Mahmud and Tahsinah Ahmed

## Acronyms and Abbreviations

AAB	ActionAid Bangladesh
BDS	Bangladesh Development Society
CE	Continuing education
DAM	Dhaka Ahsania Mission
ECD	Early childhood development
EFA	Education for All
FGD	Focus group discussion
FIVDB	Friends in Village Development Bangladesh
GS	Grameen Shikka
NFE	Non-formal education
NGO	Non-government organization
PL	Post-literacy
PLCE	Post-literacy and continuing education
REFLECT	Regenerated Freirean Literacy Through Empowering Community Techniques, popularly known as REFLECT
RfC	Reading for Children
SC USA	Save the Children USA
TLM	Total Literacy Movement

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## Executive Summary

In Bangladesh, the concept of reading stories to children to promote and retain literacy has never been explored. The Reading for Children (RfC) intervention was initiated by Save the Children USA (SC USA) based on its' experience in adult literacy and early childhood development. RfC was then implemented in partnership between five leading non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Bangladesh: Bangladesh Development Society, Dhaka Ahsania Mission, Friends in Village Development in Bangladesh, Grameen Shikka, and Save the Children USA.

The research is based on the well-documented principles that reading to children as a post-literacy intervention will eventually increase reading habits of neo-literates and also encourage children to read more. Based on these assumptions, RfC promotes reading to children as a post-literacy intervention.

The research aimed to identify:

- § The motivating and de-motivating factors for neo-literates in reading for children;
- § The process of utilizing storybooks at home;
- § The dynamics involved in reading storybooks by neo-literates;
- § Reading ability and difficulties of neo-literates; and
- § The barriers in reading for children at individual, family and community levels.

A total of 493 Bangladeshi women participating in post-literacy activities in 25 adult basic literacy centers managed by RfC's partner organizations took part in the research. The partner organizations first developed an RfC book set consisting of 40 storybooks that met the following criteria: appropriate for neo-literates and children ages 3–8, well illustrated, and positive for child development. Participants met on a weekly basis for six months and practiced reading the stories in small groups and discussed their book choices for the week. They borrowed a minimum of one book from the RfC book set per week, took the books home and read the stories to their children. Data on the influence of reading within the participants' home and community was gathered through participants' logbooks, collected data from weekly sessions, quarterly focus group discussions, case studies, and session observations and home visits.

The participants' motivation, which was largely determined by their desire to do well for their children, helped them through the RfC process. Participants viewed RfC as an opportunity to teach their children in a "joyful learning situation" and to strengthen their own personal reading skills. There were a few de-motivating factors involved, including shyness about low reading skills. However, the great personal motivation of the participants overcame most obstacles.

The findings showed that reading habits, reading abilities, family practices, and book choices shifted during the course of the research. Many of the participants said that the children lost interest in the stories if they were not read fluently in one sitting – as a result, the participants read the stories once or twice individually and then read them to the children, thus increasing their reading skills. In fact, the reading frequency and reading ability of the participant group increased significantly by the end of the research period. Participants with schoolchildren eventually found the courage to read their children's textbooks – and participants also let their children determine their book choices for the week. The children's interest in the

reading process was paramount for the participants. Findings also showed that most husbands supported the participants in their reading practice.

Books choices were determined through a number of factors, including:

- § Children's overall interest in the book;
- § The nature of the book;
- § Appearance of the book; and
- § The response of the RfC group to the book.

Difficulties with the reading process were attributed to a number of factors: unfamiliarity and discomfort with conjoint letters, small fonts, and lengthy book texts made reading challenging for some. Geographic location and the work habits of the participants also affected the reading process. However, difficulties the participants encountered gradually reduced throughout the course of the RfC intervention.

It was observed that Reading for Children created a reader's forum among the rural poor where the availability of books and the habit of reading was not prominent. The participants were not the only readers of the books borrowed from RfC, but also their children, who in turn shared the books with their friends. Neighbors and relatives also expressed their interest to read stories. This resulted in books being borrowed by one participant but actually being read by many.

The research found that the RfC intervention strengthened and consolidated the participant's literacy skills and the implementation process facilitated their graduation into literacy skill users. These positive results have led to RfC being implemented in the post-literacy programs of some of the partner organizations. There are global implications as well – RfC has the potential to be incorporated into basic post-literacy and continuing education programs in any geographic, ethnographic, or economic situation.

There were valuable lessons learned, particularly in regard to participant motivation. The participants perceived RfC as an initiative for children through the involvement of mothers – for them, the focus of the program was on the children. This was a powerful motivator for the participants.

Key recommendations include developing a fully appropriate book set for neo-literates and their children and directly tying post-literacy programs to adult basic literacy courses. This would enable the participants to continue developing their new skills without losing the momentum of the course or the companionship of the group.



## Introduction

Understanding the benefits of reading to children, for both the child and the reader, is generally taken for granted by educated parents in the developed world.

In Bangladesh, however, although individual reading to children on a large scale is less practiced, there existed a traditional practice of story telling and reading *puthis* and *loko gathas*<sup>1</sup> aloud at home or *bhat kabitas*<sup>2</sup> at rural *haats* (weekly markets) to a gathering of villagers. Though these traditions were quite popular events all over the country, the skill to read aloud was limited to a few people – the literate.<sup>3</sup>

Over time, Bangladeshi village life has changed and many of these older traditions are dying out. Communal readings, poetry recitation and traditional theatre are disappearing – sometimes replaced by other forms of entertainment and recreation, but only in a few instances by adults reading to children in individual homes. Family patterns have also changed – with traditional extended families breaking down into nuclear families, and with families themselves shrinking in size, children are finding themselves growing up in more and more gradual isolation.

In Bangladesh, the concept of reading stories to children to promote and retain literacy has never been explored. The Reading for Children (RfC) intervention was initiated by Save the Children USA (SC USA) based on its' experience in early childhood development (ECD) and adult literacy. Globally acclaimed findings on ECD have proved that positive interaction between the mother and child yields positive cognitive outcomes for the child. This research has been reinforced with two basic and universally accepted principles that strategies which encourage the new learner to read more easily, frequently, and regularly and to continue reading will have a positive impact on the retention of literacy skills. Secondly, children's exposure to books and reading from an early age contributes positively to their overall development. Based on these assumptions, the RfC research promotes reading to children as a post-literacy intervention.

The scope of the research did not include the measurement of the effect of the intervention on literacy retention or on child development, but it was assumed that the possibility for positive results in regard to these two issues was and is likely. It is difficult to single out the effect of a particular intervention when it is part of a package of other interventions. The research did not try to explore the effect of this intervention on child development, as substantive research already exists to prove that the quantity and quality of time spent by mothers with their children has positive effects on the development of a child. It would have taken a much longer and complex study to isolate the impact of such an intervention on individual children's development.

This research focused on whether reading stories to children could gain acceptability and popularity as a post-literacy intervention within the neo-literates' community. The research tried to gain a better understanding of how newly literate adults incorporate the ideas and

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<sup>1</sup> "Puthis" and "loko gathas" are stories or folk tales written in the form of ballads or epics that are read aloud, sometimes added to a tune or rhythm by village elders or by those who can read.

<sup>2</sup> "Bhat kabitas" are poems written on the local level on contemporary social issues.

<sup>3</sup> Of a total population of 126 million (1998), "there are currently about 40 million illite rates between 8 and 35 years old", Bangladesh Education Sector Review Vol. 2, The World Bank, 2000.

practices of reading to children into a whole range of other post-literacy options and opportunities available.

Where illiteracy and poverty have dominated the lives of the majority, the simple practice of reading stories to children is culturally alien and not generally practiced in Bangladesh. Exploring this issue was one of the key challenges of the research.

Introducing this apparently alien intervention of reading stories to children within the rural areas was challenging for a number of reasons, especially regarding the acceptability of the practice. There were socio-economic and cultural contexts to be considered: high illiteracy rates limited the number of those who could read; endemic poverty limited people's opportunity to purchase books; potential readers had limited mobility and therefore had limited access to books; the opportunity cost of taking the luxury of time for reading for those trying to survive were high; the concept of "reading" in Bangladeshi culture is associated with "studying", and therefore is not related with "recreation" but rather an essential activity for those who can afford it. In such a context, reading storybooks is not encouraged among most families because parents perceive that it is not a time effective or cost effective investment; moreover, the fact that women need recreation is an unfamiliar and sometimes unaccepted practice in villages and therefore, men are not used to play a supportive role in the family for this purpose. It is in only those families where mothers have the skill, means and time to read stories to children that this practice generally exists. In many homes "to read" is a synonym for "to study" – and often neither parents nor children think of reading as a leisure or pleasure activity but rather as a task that needs to be endured.

## ***Background***

The recognition of the importance of non-formal education in Bangladesh came into the limelight in the early 1970s. Since then, both the government and NGOs have strived to develop appropriate approaches for the basic education of children, adolescents, and adults. Basic education through these initiatives facilitated adults to acquire literacy and life skills, but the greatest challenge has been to find ways to help adult learners retain their newly acquired skills in reading and writing and to actually utilize these skills in ways that contribute to the overall development of the individual, the family, and the community.

The focus on Post-literacy (PL) and Continuing Education (CE) in Bangladesh is relatively new, although PL and CE have been recognized as vital components of Non-Formal Education (NFE) and have gained importance over time. PL is defined as the consolidation, retention and furtherance of skills acquired by neo-literates during basic literacy courses. In general, CE is related more to the improvement of occupational development rather than knowledge development. CE is a set of organized group or individual activities, either facilitated or unfacilitated, where the focus is either on primary/secondary equivalency or functional skills training wherein the learner can use their literacy skills to increase income, improve family welfare and participate fully as citizens. PLCE aims to prevent regression to semi-literacy or illiteracy. It seeks and supports strategies to develop advanced literacy skills that are essential for autonomy in learning; for critical reading; for independent problem solving and for being able to translate education into economic gain. Ultimately leading to lifelong learning, PLCE is the process that enables people to become agents of their own education and change. But satisfactory PLCE strategies have not yet systematically been developed, though many organizations working in NFE have been testing different models and approaches. A number of different ideas have already been tried in post-literacy by

different organizations with much acclaim, but good practices have yet to be coordinated. Studies and evaluations support the fact that although both government and NGOs have had experience in post-literacy, efforts have not been extensive. Implementing organizations have yet to establish an effective set of post-literacy interventions that can demonstrate effectiveness.

In Bangladesh, the government's growing commitment to education is evident by an increase in its own budgetary allocations and scaling-up of investments to development partners. This has led to multifold expansion of mass education efforts. National and global commitments to education have been reinforced through the Education For All (EFA) and Total Literacy Movement (TLM) interventions; the outcome of these efforts has added to the demand for focus on PLCE. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have made special efforts to revise and redesign their education programs incorporating or strengthening PLCE while the government has provided support to pilot 23 models/approaches to bring out the best practices. The government has also initiated a PLCE 1 project with assistance from the World Bank and grant from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. It is also planning to launch another PLCE project in 2002 with support from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Department for International Development (DfID) in order to cater to the large number of NFE graduates. These projects will be built on lessons from the pilot project. Despite these efforts, the search for "workable" interventions and "appropriate" models/approaches remain a constant concern within and outside Bangladesh.

### ***Objectives of the research***

The objective of the research was to test the effectiveness of the RfC intervention as a viable post-literacy strategy. The specific objectives of the research were to explore:

- § The motivating and de-motivating factors for neo-literates in reading for children;
- § The process of utilizing storybooks at home;
- § The dynamics involved in reading storybooks by neo-literates;
- § Reading ability and difficulties of neo-literates; and
- § The barriers in reading for children at individual, family and community levels.

### ***Rationale of the research***

The RfC research was initiated in order to contribute to the search for effective post-literacy strategies. It was hoped that through the intervention of mothers reading stories to children, the children would gradually develop an interest in listening to stories and eventually be motivated enough to learn to read the stories themselves.

Similarly, it was expected that the pleasure of reading stories to children would lead the neo-literates to spontaneous practice of literacy skills and eventually motivate them to read more for themselves.

The study aimed to contribute to the overall understanding of learning and literacy in rural Bangladesh and to be informative and useful to anyone working within the sphere of education.

Different agencies involved with post-literacy and continuing education may benefit from this study's outcome of a tested RfC intervention to post-literacy and an identified set of effective reading materials for this approach.

## ***Underlying Assumptions***

The research posits that reading to children as a post-literacy intervention will eventually increase reading habits of neo-literates and also encourage children to read more.

The underlying assumption is based on the globally accepted links between child development and adult education/continuing education which show that strategies which encourage new literates to read more frequently, to read more regularly and to continue to read will have a positive impact on the retention of their literacy skills and will contribute positively towards the overall development of the child.

## **Research Methodology**

### ***The research organizations***

The project was implemented in partnership with 5 leading NGOs in Bangladesh: Dhaka Ahsania Mission (DAM), Friends in Village Development in Bangladesh (FIVDB), Bangladesh Development Society (BDS) on behalf of ActionAid Bangladesh (AAB), Grameen Shiksha (GS) and Save the Children USA (SC USA) (Annex A1).

Each partner organization used different literacy approaches. Both DAM and FIVDB used their own primer while GS, BDS and SC USA did not. BDS and SC USA used the REFLECT approach, which has been developed, initiated and promoted by ActionAid. GS used their own approach, based on the Freirean pedagogy and REFLECT approach, popularly known as “life-oriented” education. Consequently, the target population had different backgrounds in regard to their experiences in basic literacy.

The participants’ post-literacy experiences also varied because each of these organizations had differently designed post-literacy programs. FIVDB has Grameen *pathagars* (box libraries); DAM supports *gonokendras* (community learning centers); BDS maintains *lokokendras* (peoples’ center for learning and action); SC USA implements post-Reflect Circles and mobile libraries; and GS has post-literacy centers, supported by mobile libraries and a resource center (Annex B).

### ***The research location***

The research partners were located in Narshingdi of Dhaka division (DAM), Sylhet of Sylhet division (FIVDB), Barisal of Barisal division (BDS), Manikgonj of Dhaka division (GS), and in Brahmanbaria of Chittagong division (SC USA).

Living in different geographical areas, the target groups had different dialects, cultural practices and socio-economic lifestyles. Though some of the adult education program interventions were similar, many differed according to needs of the program, area, and target group. The research aimed to introduce RfC as a common post-literacy intervention as part of these different education programs.

### ***The research population***

India

Sylhet

nanbaria

The target group was selected from 5 post-literacy centers of the participating NGOs. Each partner organization also chose a control center in addition to these centers. One case study was conducted per center during the research.

The research focused on a study population of approximately 500 neo-literate women – each of the 5 partner organizations maintained 5 centers with 20 members per center. The criteria for participant selection included those who had completed basic education courses, were competent as readers, willing to participate in the research and who had children in their families, extended family or neighborhood within the ages of 3–5 and 6–8 years. The research assumed that the majority of the women were mothers; however, in some instances the participants were either unmarried or without children, but had direct access to the children of family members. The research assumed children ages 3–5 would not be able to read and those within ages 6–8 would have basic reading ability.

The research was designed to involve only neo-literates. However, the actual population size of 493 participants included 108 (22%) women who were pre-literates. This was taken into consideration during the data analysis and in some instances separate results were calculated. It proved to be impossible to separate the pre-literate women from the neo-literates in the RfC centers as they were already involved in the post-literacy programs of the partner organizations and had a keen motivation to join the RfC study.

### ***The research team***

As an action research there was stronger emphasis on the qualitative aspect of the study. The research team consisted of a research advisory team and a research operation team. The research advisory team was comprised of representatives from the five partner organizations. This research advisory team provided continuous support and guidance for the research and also provided leadership within their own organizations. The research operational team consisted of a research associate, 5 field coordinators, 23 facilitators and 493 participants of 25 post-literacy centers. The research operation team implemented the research at the field level (Annex A).

### ***The research process***

The timeframe for the RfC intervention was planned for six months, according to the time allocated for data collection. It was assumed that the RfC sessions would take place for 20 weeks within six months. Target rates were set allowing each participant to borrow 40 books on the condition that they borrowed a maximum of two books per week. It was on this consideration that the number of books of the RfC book set was fixed at 40.

The books were selected on the basis of the following criteria:

- § Storybooks;
- § Appropriate for neo-literates to read;
- § Well illustrated;
- § Appropriate for children 3–8 years old; and
- § Positive for child development.

Though the government, NGOs and the private sector produce an admirable number of books each year, the survey found that these books were basically intended for either literate groups

or for neo-literate adults. Books developed for neo-literate adults were basically written on topics in regard to functional or livelihood issues, which were not interesting or attractive for children. On the other hand, books available for children were too difficult for neo-literate adults. The number of books identified which would be both easy for adult neo-literates to read and attractive for children were very few.

Among the 40 books, 16 were selected from the Early Childhood Development (ECD) Unit, a former joint initiative of SC USA and PLAN International. The ECD unit books had been developed considering neo-literates' reading ability and child development. The remaining 24 books were selected from organizations that produce continuing education materials and books. The selected books were mainly storybooks that included a small amount of text and good illustrations (Annex D). Some of the books were traditional stories about kings and queens; some included traditional sayings; some were humorous stories; others included jokes and quizzes. Most books had some moral message.

The research team found it extremely difficult to select appropriate books for the research. Therefore, the books selected for this research were not the “best choices” but rather the “only choices” available.

All the partner organizations had different types of post-literacy programs, which included various types of libraries from which participants could read and borrow other books, but the project only considered the use of books from the selected RfC set.

After the book set was delivered to the partner organizations, facilitators and related personnel attended trainings on the RfC module and accordingly facilitated sessions in the centers with the participants (Annex E). Participants gathered in the centers weekly and practiced the skill of reading stories. They also borrowed a minimum of one book per week, took the books home and read the stories to the selected children.

The weekly sessions in the centers included the following:

- § Feedback sessions (participant’s feedback on the books they had borrowed);
- § Collection of borrowed books;
- § Distribution of books;
- § Individual reading in groups (reading practice); and
- § Demonstration/practice of books borrowed for next week.

### ***The research tools***

The partner organizations compiled baseline information for the project by collecting and preparing household, participant and child profiles. Each partner organization also selected a post-literacy center/circle as control group. Data was gathered from the following sources:

- § Participants maintained logbooks;
- § Facilitators collected data from weekly sessions;
- § Field coordinators collected and compiled data from session observation and home visits; and
- § The researcher collected, compiled and analyzed the data.

Information was collected from primary and secondary sources through questionnaires, case studies, data collection formats, checklists, focus group discussions (Annex F), observations,

literature reviews, weekly sessions, individual home visits and interviews. The following tools were used for the research study (Annex G):

- § Participant's Checklist: Reader's Log Sheet (maintained by the readers as they read the books, and shared during the feedback sessions);
- § Facilitator's Checklist: 1) Facilitator's Observation Sheet (maintained by the facilitators, shared during the feedback sessions), 2) Facilitator's Register (to keep quantitative record of attendance & borrowing of books);
- § Field Coordinator's Checklist: 1) Monthly Reports (Prepared from compilation of weekly reports, submitted to the researcher), 2) Home Visit Reports (conducted and compiled weekly), 3) Session Observation Forms (maintained weekly);
- § Focus Group Discussion (FGD) Checklist: 1) FGDs were conducted each quarter with selected participants of 5 centers, 2) one overall FGD was conducted within one selected center; and
- § Researcher's Checklist: Case Studies (25 case studies were carried out during the last 3 months of the project).

Data was analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) and Excel.

### ***Working definitions***

**Literate** Those who have completed a basic literacy course of 6–9 months and have developed elementary skills in reading, writing, arithmetic, and consciousness (sometimes referred to as *life skills*). The elementary skills attained by literate persons are further defined:

1. Reading: The participant can read easily with little effort. She can group words and phrases together meaningfully. Relatively few reading errors are made. Her reading style indicates comprehension.
2. Writing: The participant can write her name and address correctly. She can also fill out simple forms correctly, as well as create shopping lists. She can take very simple and short dictation easily and correctly in addition to being able to write simple paragraphs of 5–8 simple sentences on her life situation.
3. Arithmetic: The participant can read numbers with various digits up to 500. She can solve simple addition and subtraction problems with little effort (3 digit addition; 2 digit subtraction). The participant is able to understand and read multiplication tables as well and solve oral math problems with some difficulty.
4. Consciousness: The participant has knowledge about her personal, familial, social, and occupational problems. She can analyze and cite examples of these problems.

**Pre-Literate** Those who have had 2–3 years of basic education in their childhood.

**Neo-Literate/Post-Literate** Those who have started to practice the skills related to reading, writing, arithmetic, and consciousness learned through an adult basic literacy course. The participant's level of understanding has reached the stage where she is able to practice her new skills at an individual, family, social, and work level.

**Reading Ability** The participants were divided into three groups on the basis of their reading ability. Participants with “very good” reading ability:

- § Read easily with little effort;
- § Group words and phrases together meaningfully;
- § Make relatively few reading errors; and
- § Have a high level of comprehension.

Participants with “good” reading ability:

- § Read with hesitancy;
- § Group most words and phrases correctly;
- § Comprehend most of their reading.

Participants with “fair” reading ability:

- § Read slowly by sounding out the words;
- § Read words instead of phrases;
- § Encounter difficulty with individual words;
- § Have limited comprehension.

**“Readability” of books** The books in the RfC book set were divided into three general “readability” categories: “very easy”, “easy”, and “difficult.” Books categorized as “very easy” were generally picture books with limited text (consisting of 2–3 simple sentences per page), had words consisting of 3–4 characters, and employed no usage of conjoint letters. Books that were “easy” usually had an even distribution of illustration and text, with the text consisting of words comprised of 3–5 characters, sentences of 5–6 words, and paragraphs of 5–6 sentences. The “easy” books also used relatively few conjoint letters. “Difficult” books generally consisted of 70% text, 30% illustration. Text fonts were small and difficult for participants to read. The text itself consisted of words of 3–6 characters, sentences of 6–8 words, and paragraphs of 6–10 sentences. Difficult books used conjoint letters significantly.

**Reading Habit** Reading habit was measured as the voluntary and repetitive action of reading.

### ***The research period***

The duration of the research was one year, including 6 months of direct fieldwork. Each organization allocated at least one day per week for the project in the 5 post-literacy centers from within their existing post-literacy programs.

### ***Limitations***

1. The participants belonged to poor rural communities and the majority faced the challenge of making a balance between their very busy private life and their role as research participants. Due to this pressure, some participants were not able to fully participate at all times.
2. The research duration was only one year, which was too short a time for participants to adequately master the skill of reading stories to children.



3. As discussed earlier, it was difficult to find appropriate number of books for this research. A more rich and diverse book set might have brought about more interesting results.
4. The research aimed to explore the effectiveness of reading for children as a post-literacy intervention. Accordingly, it was decided that the research population would consist of only neo-literates. But the partner organizations could not maintain this standard during selection of participants. A significant portion (22%) of the research population was found to be pre-literate.

# Findings and Recommendations

## *Principal findings*

### **Background of participants**

A baseline survey was carried out regarding participant's reading skills and reading habits. A total of 493 women in 25 adult basic literacy centers took part in the research. They were categorized into different age groups for the purpose of the research: ages 15–20, ages 21–25, ages 26–30, ages 31–35, and ages 36 and over (36+). (Further baseline information can be found in Annex H.)

It was assumed that the participants would be neo-literate and have young children 3–5 years old. But in reality, 22% of the participants were pre-literate and were already engaged in the post-literacy activities of their respective organization. Some of the participants were also unmarried (22%) and had no children of their own, but they had access to the young children in their family or neighborhood (younger brother/sister, niece, nephew, etc). 78% of the participants were married. (Figure 2.) There were few married participants who read for their grand children. All participants were from poor rural communities with almost similar economic backgrounds.

The participants were divided into three groups on the basis of their reading ability: “very good”, “good”, and “fair”. The 15–20 age group had the highest number of “very good” readers; the 36–52 age group had the highest number of “fair” readers. (See page 8 for the working definitions on base reading ability.)

### **Motivating and de-motivating factors in RfC**

At the beginning of the research, the participants shared their interests and motivation for joining RfC. The major motivating factors were: 1) to teach their children in a joyful learning situation; 2) to learn and practice reading; 3) to enjoy reading; 4) to broaden the horizons of both; 5) to make children interested in studying; and 6) to be able to help their children in their studies.

But individual motivation for joining the RfC program varied from participant to participant. Some participants articulated that they wished to stay in the center for a longer period and learn more. They linked literacy to social status and wanted to shed the label “illiterate”. This was an important motivation for them.

Not all the participants attending and completing the adult basic literacy course achieved the same level of literacy skills. In every group there were 2–4 participants who joined the RfC center with very low literacy skills, but were included in the research because of their high level of interest and motivation. Through the RfC intervention, the low achievers intended to increase their literacy level through more practice, while the high achievers hoped to learn new skills. Jharna Rani, a SC USA participant from Brahmanbaria, commented, “*You should have your own understanding. No one can steal your education from you.*”

A group of highly motivated pre-literates (5.5%; 27 participants) also joined the intervention after reporting that there was no scope of reading in the villages. RfC provided them with an opportunity to practice and enjoy reading and also teach their children.

Another reason for joining RfC was to be able to help their children with their studies – this goal was equally important to all participants. The participants stated that although most of the schoolchildren above grade 2 could read better than them, when a mother is able to read well she achieves a level of confidence that helps her to support and guide her child with his/her studies. Being a part of the RfC intervention, a new initiative, also gave the participants a sense of importance. Sufia, a DAM participant in Narsingdi, stated, “*My son's father doesn't know how to read and write. And if I also remain illiterate then who will teach my son?*”

While talking to the GS participants in Manikgonj, it was found that many of their relatives work in the Middle East. For that reason they felt a need to learn to read and write and suggested that the RfC intervention include a writing component. Accordingly, some of the RfC member groups began a joint writing program.

Very few de-motivating factors were found within the groups. In a few cases weak reading skills were a de-motivating factor because some participants felt shy and embarrassed about their very basic reading skills, even though they were very motivated participants. Due to this, attendance in some centers was low, but it was not the only cause for low attendance. Attendance also depended on the NGO and its relationship with the community, the facilitators' commitment, and the participants' motivation and relationship with the NGO. There were some instances in which the facilitators would go to the houses of the participants to remind them to come to the centers.

Age was a de-motivating factor for some. Participants who irregularly attended SC USA's Sagarika and Geetali centers told facilitators, “*We can sign our names so we are happy. Our children will go to school, but our learning age is gone.*”

## **Process of utilizing storybooks**

### **Choice in selection of books**

Several factors were identified which determined the participants' book choices, including:

*Children's interest.* It was observed that the interest of the children was the dominating factor in determining which book the participant selected to borrow. The children often accompanied the participants to the weekly RfC sessions in order to choose the books. The interest of the children was more important to participants than their own interest.

Participants supported this observation in focus group discussions, stating that they gave more importance to their children's book preference than to their own liking. The majority of mothers stated that the content of the books needed to be educational as well as enjoyable for children. The books also needed to have colorful pictures. After analyzing this aspect of book selection, it was discovered that the books published from the ECD Unit were most frequently borrowed, most likely because they were developed specifically for children.

*Nature of the books.* The participants preferred books with stories that were realistic in nature. They explained that the children asked many questions about things in the stories that were not realistic, such as “Can fish really cry?” or “Can rabbits really talk?” The participants could not answer such questions; it made them uncomfortable not to be able to answer.

*Appearance of the books.* The overall appearance of the book was also an important factor in influencing participants' book preferences. Participants were attracted to books that were colorful and interesting to look at.

*Literacy ability.* Participants with limited reading ability wanted books with limited text. Participants with stronger reading skills tended to borrow books with lengthy text. Data analysis showed that since the participants were a mix of readers with strong and weak skills, the overall difference in borrowing books with limited text and lengthy text were not significant. However, due to limited number of books, weak readers initially borrowed the easier books but later on also borrowed the difficult books.

*Exchange of experience.* Sharing their experience of reading a particular book was an important factor that initiated interest of participants. This information influenced other participants in their weekly book selections.

### **Dynamics involved in reading storybooks**

During the course of the RfC intervention, the process of reading stories was demonstrated to the RfC facilitators and supervisors (see training module in Annex E). They were encouraged to continue reading stories to the participants throughout the project cycle. However, during the course of the project different processes were observed. The reading techniques of the stories and even the use of the storybooks varied due to the diversity in the reading abilities of the participants and their different objectives for joining the research. (For example, some participants used the books as a motivating factor to convince their children to do some work.) The research valued and encouraged these indigenous practices and experiences in this regard.

Many of the participants said that the children lost interest in the stories if they were not read fluently in one sitting. As a result, the participants read the stories once or twice individually and then read them to the children. Reading to the children increased the participants' scope of practice and, because of this, the reading skills of many of the participants increased.

Most husbands supported the participants in their reading practice. There were other spouses who were not very supportive or did not bother with story reading. Discussions were conducted with both the supported and non-supported participants. Literate husbands supported their wives and helped them read; they also wanted their wives to become literate. There were also some illiterate husbands who supported their wives to continue their effort to become literate and encouraged their wives to read stories to them. The husbands usually listened to the stories at night. Mumtaz, a DAM participant, said, “*My husband and I read the stories together. He helps me read.*” This created a different learning environment in the family, which in turn was supportive to the development of male–female relationship. This practice of literacy skills contributed to the overall empowerment of the women within the family.

Arshada Rokeya, a proud DAM participant in Narsingdi, reflected, “*My husband requests others to write letters for him. But now I can write my own letters.*”

Many participants simply read the stories like schoolbooks to teach their children to read: “*I allowed my child to read with me line by line. My child enjoyed the stories in this way. This also helped him to learn to read well so that he could read properly in school,*” stated Prova of BDS, Barisal.

Some groups maintained a reading chain in which the mothers read to their children, who in turn read the stories to their friends. Aklima of BDS in Barisal read stories to her 8-year old child, who in turn read the story to her 4-year old brother. Pushpamala, a GS participant in Manikgonj, read a story to a child of her relative residing next door; the child in turn told the story to other children and used body language when necessary. This brought about a friendly relationship among the children in the locality and they felt happy to add this new activity to their usual games.

Some children could read better than the participants (in most cases, mothers). In these cases, the participants learned from the children. The children read the stories first and the participants listened. The participants then tried to read by themselves with the children's help. Tajiron and Taslima of DAM in Narshingdi initially did not have very good reading abilities. They listened to the stories read by their children and tried to read with their help. This was supportive to the children's mental development while at the same time developing teaching techniques. This process also increased the children's study hours.

Some of the mothers read stories to their children with the intention of encouraging them to read schoolbooks. Khodeza of BDS, Barisal used to motivate her 4-year old son to read his school alphabet book by reading stories to him. This process helped Khodeza teach her son.

It was observed that most of the participants, especially those completing the basic literacy courses, were unable to read using punctuation marks ( , . ? ! ). Nevertheless, they and their children enjoyed the story reading very much.

By having to explain the story to the children, the participants developed critical analytic skills. They were also able to explain and analyze the need to read to their children and its importance. As they were able to justify the need, they were able to take necessary actions as deemed fit. The women completed their household work and managed to find time to read. This spontaneous urge to read has not been observed in other post-literacy programs.

### **Borrowers, readers and frequency of re-reading**

The number of borrowers, number of readers and number of times they re-read an individual book depended on the participant's reading ability, attendance at the RfC center, and the nature of the books. The “borrowers” were the participants who borrowed storybooks during the weekly RfC sessions. However, the borrower was one of many people who read the books as in each borrower's family there were others who were eager to read. Therefore, the number of readers per book proved to be higher than the number of borrowers. One reader can also read a book several times. Emur Ghum (Emu's Sleep), the most popular book in the RfC book set, was borrowed by 322 participants, but read by 500 readers 854 times (Annex I). The average number of borrowers for each book was 250; the average number of readers was 445; and the books were read an average number of 713 times. (Figure 4.)

## **Readability and interest**

Participants most enjoyed the books that they found easy to read because they could read those books thoroughly. The participants stated *“We don't feel like reading books if we cannot read it properly. Besides, the children also lose interest listening to the stories. They don't want to listen to stories if they cannot understand them. And it's necessary to read a story repeatedly in order to understand it properly.”* Some mothers felt embarrassed not to be able to read properly in front of their school-going children. Focus group discussion participants stated, *“Stories are not interesting if they are not read fluently and smoothly. Children do not want to listen. So we practice reading the stories ourselves 2–3 times before reading it out to the children. This helps us to practice reading and increases our reading ability.”*

Analysis showed that the correlation between "very interesting" and "very easy" was highest, indicating that the "very interesting" books were the easiest to read. Similarly, the correlation between "easy" and "interesting" was high. The relationship between "difficult" and "not interesting" was also high, indicating that difficult books were not interesting at all. (Figure 5.)

## **Readability and frequency of re-reading**

The study had assumed that participants would repeatedly read books that were the easiest. But data proved otherwise. Books that were too easy or had a small amount of text were not interesting to re-read. Rather, books that were reasonably easy but had considerable amount of text were read more frequently. Difficult books were read comparatively less. Nevertheless, participants also read the difficult books also in order to improve their reading skills and learn conjoint letters.

The books that were easy for skilled readers were difficult for the weak ones. Commenting on the books Badami Bhalluk (Brown Bear) and Nakshi Kattha (Embroidered Quilt), both having short text, Rahima of BDS stated that, *“It's possible to finish reading books with less text within one hour. In future try to give us books with more text.”*

Many participants with limited reading ability required the assistance of others in order to read. A relationship between the frequency of re-reading between "very easy", "easy", and "difficult" books was observed when comparing it to the readability of the books. The correlation with "easy" books was highest, implying that participants re-read the easy books most frequently. The correlation of frequently read books with "very easy" books was comparatively less. This signified that the reading frequency of "very easy" books was less than of "easy" books. The least frequency was for books that were “difficult”. Participants did not enjoy these books and therefore did not re-read them frequently.

## **Reading abilities and difficulties of participants**

### **Reading abilities of the participants**

Some of the participants in the program were able to read and comprehend the stories thoroughly but there were others who could only read with great difficulty. Again, there were

some who could only read by sounding out the words; in every center there were 2–4 women who could only identify letters. All of these women had interest in gaining literacy.

The reading abilities of the participants developed through reading practice. Through the reading process, they also learned many new words and conjoint letters. Shafia from BDS Barisal could only identify letters and read with great difficulty at the beginning of the RfC intervention, but at the end she could read satisfactorily. Puspa Mala, a participant of the Taltala center of GS, initially had difficulty reading conjoint letters. But, through practice and her personal motivation, later on she was able to read stories to her nephew and her relatives' other preschool children. Her nephew also could not recognize the letters initially but now he can read letters if written in large fonts.

A comparison of the base reading ability and post-RfC reading ability showed that 53% of the participants had “very good” reading ability at the end of the intervention, as compared to 27% at the beginning of the research. The number of participants with “very good” reading ability significantly increased throughout the intervention and those with “fair” and “good” reading ability decreased. (Figure 6.)

Positive results emerged when analyzing the change in level of reading ability of both the neo-literate and pre-literate groups. The number of neo-literates with “very good” reading ability increased 27%, from a baseline rate of 21% to a post-RfC rate of 48%. The number of pre-literates with “very good” reading ability increased 26%, from a baseline rate of 49% to a post-RfC rate of 75%. This indicates that the RfC intervention was an effective method for increasing the literacy abilities of both neo-literates and pre-literates. (Figure 7.)

The rates for “good” and “fair” reading ability decreased for both groups by the end of the RfC intervention: there was a 19% decrease in the number of neo-literates with “good” reading ability and a 7% decrease in those with “fair” reading ability. Pre-literates saw a 15% decrease in those with “good” reading ability and a 12% decrease in those with “fair” ability. This decrease also signifies the positive impact of the intervention on improving literacy.

The participants gained new experience from reading different stories; they were also able to imagine new stories that they shared with their children and family members. A few of the participants also wrote stories by themselves and were encouraged to write stories based on the stories read during the RfC intervention. Some of these original stories, such as that of Kamrunnesa of FIVDB, Sylhet, have been published in FIVDB's monthly magazine.

The participants' new skills also helped to create a learning environment within the family and increased their zeal to learn. Some family practices shifted to accommodate RfC meeting times: the participant's mothers looked after the younger children, like those of Sharifa and Rabeya of SC USA, Brahmanbaria. Sometimes the husbands shared household responsibilities. Sister-in-laws, neighbors and other relatives also supported the participants. At first, Helena of DAM was able to read only by sounding out each word, but her sister-in-law helped her read at home. The participants felt that this type of interaction increased positive social relationships and brought respect in the family and community.

In the focus group discussions the participants commented that in the beginning they used to read only the RfC storybooks but later they had picked up the courage to read their children's textbooks. They realized they were able to supervise their children's education.

Moreover, Reading for Children created a reader's forum among the rural poor where the availability of books and the habit of reading was not prominent. The participants were not the only readers of the books borrowed from RfC, but also their children, who in turn shared the books with their friends. Neighbors and relatives also expressed their interest to read stories. This resulted in books being borrowed by one participant but actually being read by many. RfC facilitated the creation of a new forum of readers outside the neo-literate's circle.

Significant change was found in reading habits of the participants, but there was not any significant difference in reading habits within the different age groups. The 15–20 and 36+ age groups scored relatively higher, most likely because fewer of the 15–20 age group participants were not actively engaged in child-rearing and had more free time. The 36+ group had a slightly lower reading ability than the 15–20 year olds, but their motivation was high. Most participants in this age group had older or adult children; some read to their grandchildren. In general, this group was also less directly engaged with childrearing. (Figure 8.)

### **Reading abilities of children and their development**

The children who took part in RfC were between 3 to 8 years of age, with the majority studying in grades 1–3. There were a few who did not go to school or attended pre-schools; some were in grades 4 and 5.

Children of different ages benefited in different ways by listening to the stories. Children under 5 years old could not read or fully comprehend the stories, but they enjoyed looking at the pictures and tried to understand the stories from the pictures. They were able to recognize the storybooks by looking at the covers of the books. They were also able to tell the stories by looking at the pictures. This was an expected response as younger children relate to books by first focusing on pictures and listening to the reader. Ayesha, daughter of Dolly Begum of FIVDB, was too young to attend school but she was able to identify the books that she liked.

The 3 and 4 year olds listened to the stories and were introduced to the world of books. The children were so fond of books that the mothers had a difficult time accessing the books at home. The children then become very possessive. When the participants came to the RfC center to return and borrow new books, the children were the ones who brought the books back and forth from home. The children also participated in choosing the books and would argue with the mothers to take the book of their choice. Emla, of SC USA in Brahmanbaria, always came with her mother to borrow books; she would choose the book and carry it home. This access to and handling of books generated interest in reading. After listening to stories, some children wanted to have their own alphabet books and tried to go to the nearby non-formal education (NFE) schools. However, they were not admitted into the schools because of their young age.

The children who attended school used the storybooks differently. These children were able to follow or read the stories by themselves. The children studying in grades 1 and 2 repeated the stories along with their mothers or helped each other to read. But the children in grade 3 preferred to read the stories by themselves rather than listen to their mother. The mothers were more interested in reading along with the children because this helped them read correctly.



The 5 year olds learned about colors, animals, and other concepts from the storybooks and asked a lot of questions. They tried to relate the stories to their lives and their curiosity to know more increased. Khadiza's mother, a participant at a BDS center in Barisal, taught her how to recognize turtles and other animals using the pictures in the books. She also learned how to read letters.

The children repeatedly wanted to listen to stories from the books that they liked, which increased the reading practice of mothers. The repetition of words developed the vocabulary of the children. It was also observed that the children developed their imagination by reading stories. They memorized the stories after hearing them a number of times and then they told the stories to their friends, thus increasing their verbal skills and reducing shyness. Using their imagination, they also changed parts of the stories and turned them into new stories. The schoolchildren took the storybooks with them to school and shared them with their friends. Ashraful, son of Jahera Begum of SC USA, used to hide his mother's RfC storybook among his textbooks and read them with his friends. This promoted reading beyond the textbooks and also increased the knowledge of the children in general.

It was observed that the children in general were interested in listening to stories. The children reminded their mothers about which day they had to go to borrow the books. The mothers observed that a certain discipline was created among the children: they always washed up and then sat down to listen to stories. The children read to their younger siblings and created different things that they had learned from the books, such as the leaf creatures shown in the book Pata Diya Khela (Playing with Leaves). The mothers were able to help with the children's education.

Many children reported positive feelings about going to school after they listened to stories from the book Beranor Moja (Fun Going Out). The stories are about an interesting uncle, so the children changed the name of the book to Mozar Mama (Funny Uncle).

### **Reading difficulties**

The books in the RfC book set were written with different objectives (to cater to schoolchildren attending formal and non-formal schools, adolescents, or adult learners of basic education courses, etc.). Therefore RfC participants were not able to read all the books with equal ease and understanding. The books written using short sentences were read and understood well. Some participants found conjoint letters difficult to read and because of this the RfC group facilitators had to help these participants to read and understand the words. Due to short-sightedness, many participants also had difficulty reading books printed with small fonts.

The participants lost patience reading books with long stories, as it was difficult for them to understand and recollect the story. However, those who had good reading skills preferred these more difficult books and preferred books with a balance of substantial text and illustrations.

The books in which the text was printed over colored background were difficult for the participants to read. They complained that the letters were illegible due to use of different font sizes and typography.

The participant's difficulty in reading gradually reduced over the course of the RfC intervention. By the end of the intervention the number of participants who felt no difficulty in reading rose to 68% as compared to an initial rate of 48%. (Figure 9.)

### **Finding time for reading**

The research also aimed to identify when the participants read and how frequently. A follow-up system and a format were developed to monitor their progress. Participants set a prescribed reading time at the beginning of the RfC program, but when door-to-door follow-up visits and interviews were conducted, it was nearly impossible to find anyone who could read according to their time plan. Participants read when they found the time and when their children wanted to listen to stories. There was no trend of preferred time found – time preference varied from person to person, occupation to occupation, season to season, and even area to area.

*“We have much work in our houses. We can't follow time. Whenever we get time, we try to read. It can be any time of the day. We have to read when our children want to listen to stories,”* stated Shurajani of SC USA.

The availability of electricity played a role in when a participant read as most of the participant's houses did not have electricity. Where there was no electricity, participants preferred to read during the daytime. Most of those who had electricity in their houses read at night. However, the practice of reading during the day or night was dependent on the work pattern of the participants. Those participants who worked throughout the day in the weaving and dyeing factories in Narsingdi read to their children at night using a lantern. However, there was one consistent finding across the research population: all participants found the time to read daily.

### **Barriers in reading for children**

Participants involved in seasonal work, particularly during harvest time, found it difficult to spare time for reading. This was not an issue for families who had regular income from professions based near the larger towns, as was seen among the participants of Sylhet. The families in Singair were mostly agricultural and were busy during the harvesting and planting period. In Brahmanbaria, the fishing community was busy during the rainy season harvesting fish. In Madhabdi, an industrial area, the women were involved in the clothing industries – fulltime work that ran continuously throughout the year. These women faced particular challenges, as the pressure of their workload was intense; sometimes the husbands came to the center to borrow books and helped the participants read the stories. It is important to note that there were very few cases in which the husbands and in-laws did not provide support or encouragement to help the participants to read.

But there were exceptions. Rina Rani was a participant of SC USA's Gitali center, whose husband was a fisherman and did not like her reading books. She was unable to come to the center when he was at home and only came to the center to borrow books after he had gone out to fish.

In the beginning there were many participants with problems similar to Rina Rani. However, after some time when family members began to enjoy listening to the stories, they did not stop the participants from going to the center to borrow books. But difficulties remained for

some participants – Rehana Begum of FIVDB in Sylhet was literate and longed to go to the RfC center to read. Her mother-in-law was vehemently against it. Rehana borrowed books during the first and second weeks of the intervention, but after that her mother-in-law forbade her to go to the center.

## **Additional findings**

### **Significance of geographical differences**

The research was conducted in five culturally and geographically diverse areas, which can account for many of the socio-cultural differences within the findings. For example, it was much easier to establish a relationship and collect data from the groups in Barisal than from the groups in Sylhet where women generally feel shy talking to strangers. The conservative social/religious culture of Sylhet also limited a few women's access to reading. It was easy to collect data from only one center. In contrast, it was difficult to motivate groups in the industrial area of Narshingdhi due to the participant's demanding work schedule; many could not manage to find the time to join the center. Women from groups in Shingair were motivated and empowered to read as many of their relatives worked in the Middle East; NGOs have also practiced literacy interventions in that area for many years. One participant of a group in this area used to spend 10 taka on boat fare during the floods to come to the center to collect books.

In Sylhet the system of maintaining extended families is still prevalent. Therefore it was easy to find children to read to among relatives even if participants did not have children of their own. Similarly, due to the family structure, books borrowed out by participants in Sylhet found a larger audience of readers. This was not possible in the other areas where RfC was introduced due to a lower occurrence of extended families.

Differences in dialect also factored into consideration. Participants in all the locations had the habit of explaining the stories in their own dialect. There were variations of this practice, but it was most evident in Sylhet and Barisal.

Many family members of the participants of GS in Manikgonj and FIVDB in Sylhet reside abroad. The aim of the members of the GS groups was to be able to read the letters they received from abroad. This was not an important factor for the FIVDB groups in Sylhet as they maintained communication with their relatives through telephone or by exchanging pre-taped cassettes.

### **RfC as a bridge between learner and user**

The research showed that gaining literacy skills does not ensure the use of them. Though it is assumed that the next step after gaining literacy skills is using them, maintaining literacy skills depends on a variety of factors including the person's motivation, learning ability, and learning method. Group work helps to influence this process to a significant extent.

The research found that the use of literacy skills is influenced by the participant's initial level of literacy and their social status, social position, consciousness about social norms, sensitivity, shyness, and confidence. It is important to receive support for learning and retaining literacy. Similarly it is necessary to identify interventions to use these skills and strategies to integrate these with the lives of the users. Our research showed that one of the

main motivators for gaining literacy skills was to increase social status, but many participants did not use their skills due to shyness and humility. Responding to an inquiry, Selina of DAM's Shantineketan center replied, *"We are not educated. We don't know how to read or write."* She felt shy when given a book to read, although she reads quite well. When asked again she replied that she can read but is not very skilled in doing so. Selina's response supports a general fact that neo-literates, irrespective of gender, are modest about their literacy abilities.

RfC is an effective strategy to build confidence in neo-literates by giving them the opportunity to directly practice their newly acquired literacy skills. The participants stated that they gained more confidence through the process of group work. Their reading skills and confidence increased through the process of gaining literacy, which has facilitated the process of transforming the participants from literacy learners to literacy users. The participants stated that this graduation and integration of literacy skills also elevated their social position.

During the initial phase of the intervention, many participants were not able to realize where they could use their literacy skills. They stated, *"The skills will definitely come to use, once acquired. We will be able to use them as necessary."* Most of the participants claimed that the RfC intervention strengthened and consolidated their literacy skills and the implementation process facilitated their graduation into literacy skill users.

### ***Lessons learned***

The research drew out many valuable lessons that are important for researchers, practitioners or professionals working within the area of education.

First of all, the **motivation** of most of the participants was very high due to the involvement of the children. The participants perceived RfC as an initiative for children through the involvement of mothers. To them, the focus of the program was the children – their involvement inspired the mothers to join in the RfC program and discover the use of literacy in a direct way. This indicates that literacy programs for adults could bring better results if they are linked with children.

It was found that there are different **processes of story reading** that varied from person to person and place to place. The participants felt more comfortable reading using their own style rather than using any prescribed form or instruction. Finding time to attend the RfC sessions was difficult for some – the rural participants were extremely busy and were frequently involved in many unplanned chores, therefore they could seldom get much time on their own. Nevertheless, they enjoyed the gathering in the sessions.

**Collecting actual information** from participants was not a very easy task. There were several factors that influenced this process, including the social culture and/or religion. But another important factor was the relationship between implementing organization and the participants. The research found that it was difficult to get actual information from the participants where this relationship was more hierarchical.

There were also some centers where the **attendance** and **motivation** of participants was low. Facilitators had to go to the houses of the participants to arrange the RfC sessions, a similar problem faced by adult basic literacy centers. Low literacy levels were a factor in poor

attendance, but the poor quality of organization and motivation work at the beginning of the RfC intervention in some centers was also an important factor.

The involvement of the same NGO in program **implementation and research** created some difficulty because program implementation aimed towards success while the research aimed at exploration and findings. It took quite some time for the participants and the NGOs to comprehend this difference, change their perceptions, and function accordingly.

The research did not involve **children under the age of 3** on the assumption that children so young might not understand the stories. Nevertheless, many mothers brought along children of this age to the centers and although these children may not have understood the stories fully, they enjoyed the colorful illustrations in the books and being read to. They were eager to touch the books and the pictures and sometimes folded the books, tried to turn the pages, or even tear them. By focusing on the cover and pictures – essentially “reading” the pictures – these children were exposed to the idea of symbols, thus making it easier to later make the leap into reading. Listening and language skills also benefited. Eventually, through the process of regularly accompanying their mothers, they seemed to learn that there was a certain discipline in the center that had to be followed. They learned to wait and to take turns.

## ***Recommendations***

From the experience of the research the following recommendations are made:

1. Post-literacy should start immediately upon completion of an adult basic literacy course. If there is a gap between basic and post-literacy courses, it will take time and energy to organize the group again and rekindle their spirit and motivation.
2. The research proved that through group work the participants were able to overcome the difficulties they faced at individual level.
3. For better performance it is important to organize the adult basic literacy course well and try to attain a certain level of reading skills. This could be done through meeting core competencies.
4. Home visits are important for following up during the RfC intervention, especially in the first three months. To inspire the participants, weekly or bi-weekly follow-up visits need to be conducted.
5. The learning environment is important for effective learning; for adult learning, privacy is essential. Some centers held sessions in open places where neighbors, husbands and other children gathered and observed the proceedings. The participants felt not only disturbed but also shy to learn in front of the observers. It is essential to arrange the centers in a place where participants can learn in privacy.
6. RfC can be incorporated into any post-literacy model. FIVDB and GS have already started to develop a post-literacy package incorporating RfC within their existing program. RfC has the potential to link basic and continuing education programs as well.

7. Children are a very important motivating factor for mothers; every mother wants to do better for their children. For this reason alone, RfC is a very attractive activity.
8. Along with the RfC intervention, participants expressed interest in practice writing. Different NGOs are trying to incorporate this activity into their regular program. RfC has the capacity to address a wide range of participant needs – mothers could write for their children and children could also write for their mothers.
9. Books should be graded for participants with different reading abilities. For neo-literates, books with shorter text and larger, familiar fonts would be more suitable. There were some books with stylish fonts that neo-literates find difficult to read. They prefer texts with fewer conjoint letters – conjoint letters should be broken up for easy pronunciation in reading.
10. As participants deferred to their children's choice of books, the contents of the books should be suitable for children while the writing style should be suitable for neo-literates. There should be a wide variety of books, preferably with colorful pictures. NGOs participating in RfC, other interested NGOs, or interested publishing houses can develop a project on "Materials for RfC" based on the findings of this research.

## **Conclusion**

The underlying assumptions of Reading for Children are no more a dream but rather a reality. The findings of the study have established RfC as a post-literacy intervention that increases reading habits as well as the reading ability of neo-literates. The implications are that RfC can be incorporated into any basic post-literacy and continuing education program in any geographic, ethnographic, or economic situation. RfC also supports and encourages the development of the mother/child relationship by engaging them in reading, thus inciting their desire to learn. The cumulative effect of RfC contributes progressively to the overall development of the children.

For the RfC participants, their children's welfare was the prime motivation for joining RfC; weak reading ability was the major de-motivating factor. The main factors that determined the participant's book choices included children's interest, nature of books, design of the books and the nature of the text.

Various reading processes were used in RfC by the neo-literates. The main reading dynamics were: 1) some of the participants read the stories once or twice individually before reading them to their children, 2) a few husbands and/or older children with literacy skill helped their wives or mothers read storybooks before reading them to the children, 3) some participants maintained reading chains where she would read to her children, who then read the stories to their friends, and 4) a good number of the participants read stories to their children with the intention of encouraging them to read schoolbooks.

The reading frequency and the reading ability of the participants increased significantly throughout the duration of the project, although some difficulties in reading, such as unfamiliarity with conjoint letters, difficulty seeing small fonts, and understanding lengthy texts, persisted. It was found that the children in general were interested in listening to stories. Older children learned about colors, animals and other concepts from the storybooks and

asked lot of questions. The children under 5 years could not fully comprehend the stories, but they were engaged in looking and understanding the stories through the pictures. There was no fixed time for the participants to read to their children, but they managed to find time to read usually whenever they completed their household work.

Finally, RfC is an effective strategy to build confidence among neo-literates by giving them the opportunity to directly practice their newly attained literacy skills. This effort has also helped to transform them from literacy learners to literacy users. This intervention promoted children reading beyond the textbooks, increased the knowledge and changed behavior of the children positively in general.