

FINAL REPORT
EXTERNAL EVALUATION OF USING TECHNOLOGY TO IMPROVE PRIMARY
GRADE READING IN AFGHANISTAN



THE ASIA FOUNDATION – EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

BY: MGTWELL CONSULTING SERVICES



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The evaluation has found the project to be highly effective in the Afghanistan context, achieving beyond its objectives in that it significantly improved students' attendance in school and enhanced parents' participation in their children's education. Whilst there are some opportunities to improve the project (Recommendations 1-5), TAF should consider extending the project and taking it to scale (Recommendation 6).

This report presents the End of Project Evaluation for the ***Using Technology to Improve Primary Grade Reading in Afghanistan***. This project, which is funded by All Children Reading (ACR): A Grand Challenge for Development, whose partners include USAID, World Vision and Australian Aid, was awarded in September 2017 by The Asia Foundation (TAF), in partnership with World Vision. Following a pilot phase in Kabul, the project was implemented in two target provinces, Kandahar and Nangarhar, in 8 selected schools (4 in each province). The goal of the project is *to improve the reading skills of Afghan government school children in primary school (grades 1-3) through the innovative use of sustainable, student-centered educational technology*. More specifically, the project aims to achieve the following objectives:

Objective 1: Provide access to materials that encourage reading as a joyful activity;

Objective 2: Train teachers to integrate technology based materials into their lesson plans;

Objective 3: Appropriate use and care of technology and related materials; and

Objective 4: Raise awareness about new approaches to teaching literacy through advocacy and information sharing.

The focus of this report is to ascertain 1) whether the project performed against its logical framework; 2) the relevance of the project in achieving its objectives; 3) the effectiveness of the project in serving as a teacher's aide for improving early grade reading; 4) the impact of using technology as a tool to improve early grade reading; 5) the evaluator's recommendations on whether this activity should be expanded and whether there exists additional opportunities to use technology to improve access and quality in early education. Findings for this evaluation report are based on quantitative and qualitative data collected through Focus Group Discussions, Key Informant Interviews, Surveys and Observations.

The Evaluation led to the following findings and recommendations:

Target grade school students have had increased access to materials that encourage reading. All the reading material provided were utilized by teachers and students according to schedule. The number of books ranged from 464 in one school to 1,392 in another, based on the number of Grade three students. A total of 4,176 story books were donated in Nangarhar and 2,552 in Kandahar. Physical space was provided in all the target schools to create child-friendly reading corners in all Grade 3 classes and store the digital equipment (a total of 16 smart HDTV). Furthermore, 2,700 applications were distributed to parents to encourage reading at home. The great majority of project stakeholders were aware of the innovative teaching materials (100% of Provincial MoE staff, 86% of teachers and 87% of parents). **Recommendation 1:** Due to the large number of students in each reading skill enhancement classes, a significant number (18%) were keen for more study materials to be provided. It is therefore recommended

that TAF consider providing a further range of reading materials to enhance the reading corners in the target schools.

Overall, **a positive change is evident in the reading culture of early grade students.** The use of technology has enabled a more conducive learning environment and enhanced early graders' interest in reading. Parents report that children are reading at home using the technology provided. All reading material provided to the schools has been properly maintained. Based on parents and teachers' estimates, students' absenteeism rate has decreased by as much as 90% in the target classes. School principals interviewed also believed the project could benefit other grades. **Recommendation 2:** These findings suggest the project is highly successful in promoting literacy, as well as improving attendance in the target schools – helping overcome two major educational challenges in Afghanistan. Thus, it is strongly recommended that the project be sustained and extended to other schools and possibly other grades, to benefit more children.

According to the project stakeholders, **the project is effective in serving as a teacher's aide for improving early grade reading.** All 178 teachers received quality training on how to use the innovative teaching aides. The reading materials provided were age appropriate and relevant to the cultural context. The reading materials, however, were delivered late in the project implementation. This meant teachers had to complete the reading program in a limited time, which proved disruptive to other classroom activities. Some teachers also found using the digital equipment difficult, as they had limited exposure to using technology beforehand. **Recommendation 3:** In the future, a proper stakeholder management timeline should be adopted to ensure the project can proceed as per schedule. It is also recommended that training of teachers take place on a regular basis to build their capacity in using ICT.

Parental engagement in their children's education has positively increased since the project implementation. Parents were identified as important project stakeholders. 2,726 parents received training on how to use the technology and are now able to support their children with their homework through the application. **Recommendation 4:** Research shows a strong correlation between parents' engagement and educational outcomes, including school attendance, behavior and achievement. It is recommended that the project continue to engage with parents as much as possible, through workshops on the benefits of promoting reading at home and on parents' role in their children's educational success, through training on literacy skills and/or through regular newsletters that children could compile themselves as part of literacy enhancing activities.

The use of technology in the classroom has had a positive impact on the quality of pupil learning and on pupils' enthusiasm for learning. The project's approach is child-centered and has enhanced students' participation in their learning. Teachers' perceptions have been transformed by the changes they have seen in their pupils' interests and progress, with 149 out of 173 respondents reporting that children learnt better through the use of technology. Early Grade Reading Assessments (EGRA) carried out by the MoE at regular intervals showed that the target children were progressing in their learning. Parents also agree that their children are more motivated and that they have made progress with their reading. **Recommendation 5:** To further promote a quality-learning environment, it is recommended that teachers be trained to, where possible, incorporate technology into their teaching and classroom practices, with the aim of enhancing student participation. Technology can be used to teach literacy skills through other general subjects.

There are many additional opportunities for using technology to improve access and quality in early level education. Stakeholders gave very encouraging feedback and are keen to see the project extended and expanded to include more early grade students, as well as the possibility to see the project run all the way up to 6th grade in all government schools. **Recommendation 6:** It is strongly recommended that TAF consider creating knowledge products (discussion paper, documentary) on this project, as well as consider replicating the project to include other sites. Learning generated through the project replication phase could lead to working in close partnership with the MoE to find entry points in the national curriculum for the use of technology to improve early grade reading skills, thus enabling TAF to take the project to scale.

This report was prepared by MgtWell Consulting Services for The Asia Foundation (TAF) in Kabul, Afghanistan. We would like to express our sincere gratitude to all the counterparts who actively contributed to the external evaluation of the *“Using Technology to Improve Primary Grade Reading in Afghanistan”* Project in Nangarhar and Kandahar Provinces. We are thankful to The Asia Foundation’s team for their kind support and close cooperation with MgtWell research throughout the evaluation.

MgtWell would like to thank The Asia Foundation as a whole for the trust and confidence in us to conduct this evaluation study. Finally, MgtWell's leadership would also like to acknowledge the support of its dedicated research team that worked tirelessly to collect the data necessary for conducting this study.

ACRONYMS

EC	Early Childhood
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
KAP	Knowledge Attitude Practice
KII	Key Informative Interviews
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
MoE	Ministry of Education
ToR	Terms of Reference
TAF	The Asia Foundation
MgtWell	MgtWell Consulting Services
SMC	School Management Committees
RFP	Request for Proposal
CSOs	Civil Society Organizations
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
GoIA	Government of Islamic Republic of Afghanistan
USAID	United State Agency for International Development
ACR	All Children Reading

1.0. INTRODUCTION

1.1 What is the project background?

After more than 25 years of conflict, the Ministry of Education (MoE) and its development partners have spent the last 15 years rebuilding the education system. School enrollments have gone from 1 million to 10 million, the number of teachers has increased from 64,000 to 200,000 and infrastructure, materials and administration staffing have expanded to respond to continuing needs. The massive increase in demand for education at all levels, however, places a significant strain on the existing delivery system. Educational attainment among adults remains low in Afghanistan, with just under half of the adult population reporting no formal schooling (48.4%), and only 15.8% reporting they have attended primary school.¹ Literacy is estimated at around 31% for Afghan citizens over 15 years of age, which is one of the lowest literacy rates in the world.² More than 3 million children are estimated to be out of school, and significant investment is needed to improve the quality of education³.

1.2 The Asia Foundation

The Asia Foundation (TAF) is a non-profit, non-governmental organization committed to the development of a peaceful, prosperous, just, and open Asia-Pacific region. Drawing on 60 years of experience, the TAF supports initiatives to improve governance, law and civil society; women's empowerment; economic reform and development; sustainable development and the environment; and international relations. TAF has offices in 18 countries throughout Asia and is headquartered in San Francisco. In Afghanistan, TAF supports four primary themes: Governance and Law, Women's Empowerment, Education, and Survey/Research and Knowledge Development. In the Education sector, TAF, with the support of World Vision, is implementing a project named, *Using Technology to Improve Primary Grade Reading in Afghanistan*

Project Background:

The project's goal is to improve the reading skills of Afghan government schoolchildren at the primary level (Grades 1 to 3) through the innovative use of a sustainable student-centered educational technology. More specifically, the project aims to address the following objectives:

- Objective 1: Provide access to materials that encourage reading as a joyful activity;
- Objective 2: Train teachers to integrate technology based materials into their lesson plans;
- Objective 3: Appropriate use and care of technology and related materials; and
- Objective 4: Raise awareness about new approaches to teaching literacy through advocacy and information sharing.

TAF has implemented this project in two provinces: Kandahar and Nangarhar, reaching an estimated 8,000 students (5,000 in Nangarhar and 3,000 in Kandahar) in 8 selected schools (4 in each province). The TAF also trained 173 teachers and 35 school administrators on how to use the provided technology to implement this project.

¹ The Asia Foundation, 2017, *Afghanistan in 2017: A Survey of the Afghan People*

² UNESCO Afghanistan, "Enhancement of Literacy in Afghanistan (ELA) program," <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/kabul/education/youth-and-adult-education/enhancement-of-literacy-in-afghanistan-iii/>

³ UNICEF, 2018, *Global Initiative on Out of School Children: Afghanistan Country Study*

The project is unique in that it raises awareness about new child-centered approaches to teaching literacy through advocacy and information sharing. As part of a pilot project in Kabul, The Asia Foundation selected the educational products and innovative learning technology of a private organization, Liwal Ltd., had done research and development since 1999 on its specially designed literacy curriculum distributed through multiple platforms that enhances reading capacities of children. Liwal Ltd. developed very high quality multimedia e-content along with accompanying workbooks, audio instructions and visual examples that model how to read and write. The content is age appropriate and interactive. There is also a multimedia dictionary with words, their pronunciation as well as how the words are used in sentences, all of which are aligned with the national primary school curriculum.

The application, which was developed in both national languages, Pashto, Dari and under development for multiple languages including English, supports the children as they follow the lessons and complete the relevant instructional exercises to move on to the next lesson. It can be initiated through a chip loaded on an HDTV in schools, or on smartphones, and as such can be used by the children at home with their parents' or siblings' support. This enables students to learn in a variety of settings. Parents, siblings, and teachers have all been trained to use the application. The project demonstrates a successful partnership between a public and private organization to improve access to quality education for children.

1.3 What is the project rationale?

A considerable body of evidence shows that children who read significantly below grade level by the time they reach the 3rd grade continue to struggle in school and eventually face a much higher likelihood of dropping out altogether.⁴ Similarly, research shows that student's lack of motivation and poor quality of education is one the leading causes for students' dropping out of school before completing their primary education.⁵ The *Using Technology to Improve Primary Grade Reading in Afghanistan* project aims to address these concerns by offering an innovative child-centered approach to teaching literacy through pictorial reading material and listening aids, which capitalizes on the growth of ICT in the education sector. Improved telecom connectivity and the widespread use of mobile phones⁶ in Afghanistan are also promising trends that support this initiative.

1.4 This report

Based on the Terms of Reference (*Annex*), the following report is an external evaluation of the *Using Technology to Improve Primary Grade Reading in Afghanistan* project, which focused on the following key areas:

- How the project performed against its logical framework.
- The relevance of the project in achieving its goals (as outlined in section 1.2).
- The effectiveness of the project in serving as a teacher's aide for improving early grade reading.
- The impact of using technology as a tool to improve early grade reading.

⁴ Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010, *Why Reading By the End of Third Grade Matters?*

⁵ UNESCO, 2010, *School Drop Outs: Patterns, Causes, Changes and Policies*

⁶ 80% of families own a mobile phone, as cited in The Asia Foundation, August 2017, *The Using Technology to Improve Primary Grade level Reading in Afghanistan Full Proposal submitted to All Children Reading: A Grand Challenge for Development*

- The evaluator's recommendations and additional opportunities for using technology to improve access to and quality of primary grade education.

Ultimately this evaluation report will form the basis for determining the effectiveness of the current investment in this project and will also serve as the basis for determining future investments and project expansion to relevant stakeholders'/project sponsor.

The following Section 2 presents the methodology adopted to pursue the necessary research in the two target provinces of Nangarhar and Kandahar. Section 3 addresses key strategic questions and sub-questions, which were required of the evaluation and as such, provides the overall findings and interpretation of the research that was conducted. Section 4 presents the conclusion and the recommendations for The Asia Foundation to consider in relation to extending its project.

2.0. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Evaluation Design

The Evaluation employed mixed methods with the collection of both primary and secondary data. These include a desk review, structured interviews with teachers, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with MoE staff, School Administrators, parents, TAF and World Vision staff, as well as classroom and library observations. The desk review included scanning through available project documents provided by The Asia Foundation, such as project evaluation matrix, quarterly report, and any assessment conducted. The other documents included evaluation/assessment materials, government policy, UN Published reports, INGO and NGO documents.

The evaluation focused heavily on interaction with relevant stakeholders and employed a multi-pronged approach to ensure triangulation of the findings. The target population for this evaluation consisted of 207 respondents, among them 173 school teachers, 60 school administrators, and 8 parent shuras from both Kandahar and Nangarhar Province. Children were not interviewed but were observed in classroom and library settings.

2.2. Evaluation Tools

Both Probability and Non-Probability Techniques were used in conducting the evaluation. Random sampling of probability technique was applied when collecting quantitative data from target respondents. A total of 150 questionnaires aimed at collecting quantitative data were sent out to school teachers in the target schools of Kandahar and Nangarhar Provinces and the data was subsequently gathered and analyzed using MS Excel (Version 2016).

In addition, 33 Key Informants Interviews (KII) were carried out, 24 Focus Group Discussions (FGD) took place and 56 observations were conducted, aimed at collecting qualitative data. The qualitative data was then analyzed through the Narrative Analysis Module consisting of a five steps process: 1) organize the data; 2) identify framework (coding plan); 3) Sort data into framework; 4) Use the framework for descriptive analysis; and 5) Second-order analysis. Tools were also designed to facilitate discussion and reporting on the KIIs, the FGDs and the observations. These tools were pre-tested in the field and corrected as appropriate before being used for the actual evaluation.

2.3 Addressing insecurity and cultural sensitivities

Insecurity and cultural sensitivities are important factors to account for when conducting fieldwork in Afghanistan. In order to address targeted communities in both Nangarhar and Kandahar in a culturally sensitive manner, we used a gender-matched approach, whereby male interviewers interview male respondents and female interviewers interview female respondents. Risks were well assessed and evaluators were recruited locally to ensure they are familiar with the local security issues and the target communities.

2.4 Limitations of The Evaluation

During the data collection phase, a number of limitations and challenges arose:

- School closure: As the end of the academic year was approaching during the fieldwork, some schools, and Early Childhood Education Centers, in particular, were scheduled to close.
- Locating parents: This required the field coordinators to look beyond the school boundaries.
- Locating teachers: The schools were closed due to summer vacation, and most of the targeted teachers live in districts remote from the schools. Not all teachers had access to a mobile phone, and therefore, we were not able to carry out interviews with all the teachers.
- Security: The president of Afghanistan was officially visiting Nangarhar Province during the data collection phase. As such, movement was restricted in the Province during that period, and there were reports of insecurity to take into account.

3.0. OVERALL FINDINGS & INTERPRETATIONS

This section presents the overall findings of the evaluation. The findings are articulated around 6 key questions (1-6) and also aims to address a series of sub-questions, which help reinforce the findings.

1. Has there been increased access to materials that encourage reading?

Target grade school students have had increased access to materials that have encouraged them to read. The teachers and the students utilized all digital and non-digital materials (8,206 workbooks, as well as 4,176 storybooks in Nangarhar and 2,552 in Kandahar) distributed in schools to their full extent and it was found that 97% of teachers used the materials based on the schedule that was given to them. A total of 16 smart HDTVs were distributed (2/school). These were placed in two specific rooms in each intervention school. Workbooks linked to the lessons on the Liwal app were distributed to all the targeted students in Grades 1-3. All schools ensured physical space was made available to accommodate the creation of reading corners in all Grade 3 classes and also provided user-friendly spaces to store the TVs. Due to the large number of students in each reading skill enhancement classes, a significant number (18%) asked that more study materials be provided. A large number of parents/community members (83%) also donated books to the school library. 74% of schools established logbooks for the reading corners, and another 80% of schools set rules and regulations for library usage. Students attended Paper Theater sessions that provided them with meaningful and engaging group-work activities that encouraged reading. To ensure that the project was not interrupted due to electricity outage, TAF selected schools that had been fitted with solar panels as part of the SEA II project.

The responses from the KIIs show that the relevant stakeholders - the children's parents, the target schools' principals, provincial line directorates of education and teachers - were overall well informed about the project. They regularly took part in coordination meetings to give their input on the learning materials, as well as trainings, which ensured that they were involved throughout the project implementation. The main stakeholder, the MoE, was made aware of the project taking place in the target provinces. 87% of the target school parents had also been informed of the new reading program.

2. Has the reading culture of early grade students (grades 1-3) been enhanced?

Overall, **a positive change is evident in the reading culture of early grade students.** The use of technology has enhanced their interest in reading and enabled a more conducive learning environment. Various FGDs were conducted with the parents and the teachers in the target schools, and all gave positive feedback on how the project has impacted the reading culture of the early grade students. School principals interviewed also believed the project could benefit other grades too.

Parents commented on how the project enhanced their children's reading motivation. They cited that children were now engaged with revising their lessons and spending more time doing their reading activities, regularly using the Memory Card on the screen TV and Android system mobile phones at their homes, instead of spending time playing mindless mobile phone games. They were happy to see their children engaged in meaningful learning.



Photo credits: MgtWell Consulting Services, Interview with mothers and daughters, Kandahar Province, 2018

"We have seen very good progress in their reading and learning skills and children are now keen to learn lessons and review them at home. Our children are now interested in going to school; we see important progress in our children's learning"
Mother respondent, Kandahar Province.

A mid-term evaluation conducted by the Foundation in the first phase of using technology to improve early grade reading project also highlighted that 40% of children were using the application at home, a significant result in contrast to the low expectations (5%) for home use at the start of the project⁷.

Another clear indicator of the positive change in the early graders' reading culture is the significant decrease in students' absenteeism in the target classrooms. *"One of the most significant changes we have observed is that students are now coming to classes on a regular basis,"* Principal respondent, Bibi Hawa High school, Nangarhar Province? Principals interviewed estimate that the rate of absenteeism has decreased by 90% since the project implementation (**Figure 1**). Children are clearly enjoying coming to classes and taking part in the literacy lessons, and it was also observed that their workbooks were properly looked after. *"The children love them (the books). The students are putting beautiful covers on the books. Even if they forget other books to bring to class, they never forget to bring the workbook related to technology class,"*⁸ Teacher, Kandahar Province.

⁷ Data cited from The Asia Foundation, August 2017, *The Using Technology to Improve Primary Grade Reading in Afghanistan Full Proposal submitted to All Children Reading: A Grand Challenge for Development*

⁸ Quote from All Children Reading: A Grand Challenge for Development Round 2, January –March 2018, *The Asia Foundation Quarterly Report 2*

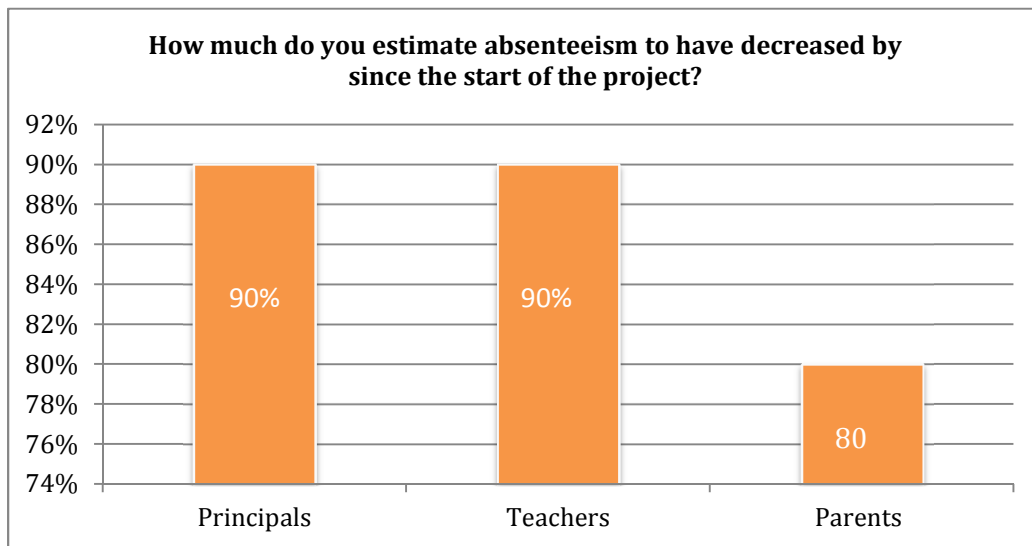


Figure 1 – Decrease in absenteeism rate according to stakeholders

3. Is the project effectively serving as a teacher's aide for improving early grade reading?

According to the project stakeholders, **the project is effective in serving as a teacher's aide for improving early grade reading skills**. All 173-targeted teachers received training on how to use the technology and how to conduct the literacy classes, and 98% of respondents confirmed that all trainings were delivered on time. 77% of the teachers rated the quality of the trainings as excellent (**Figure 2**).



Figure 2 - Teachers views about the quality of training

A further 35 school administrators received training on how to use the digital material and smart TVs and remote controls.

Teachers, however, stressed that the training was too short (2 days), and that regular trainings instead of a one-off would be useful. *"Overall the training was very good, but it was too short, and there should be some follow-up training,"* Teacher respondent. Many teachers in the government schools were not

familiar with the use of technological devices as an effective method for lesson delivery. In particular, they struggled with using the mouse.

The FGDs conducted with target teachers show that teachers found using the smart TVs helpful in delivering the lessons. The majority of teachers interviewed (72%) acknowledged that children focused more on their learning since the new technology was brought in (**Figure 3**). Teachers also overwhelmingly agreed (86%) that the children understood the lesson better when it was presented through the medium of technology. *“Since I have started teaching my students in these technology classes, I have noticed considerable improvement in their reading,”*⁹ Teacher, Kandahar Province. The majority of teachers (82%) agreed that the project had a positive impact on how the students remembered their lessons for the next day (**Figure 4**). This finding is significant as it suggests that students need to spend less time doing repeat work in class, allowing teachers to cover more of the curriculum and engage in more meaningful teaching activities. 83% also believed that the project encouraged collaborative work opportunities.

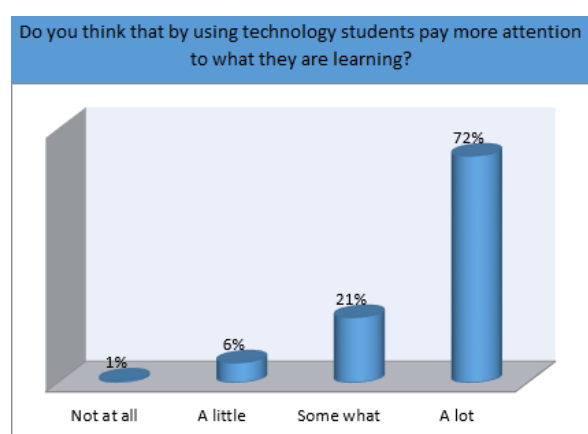


Figure 3 Teachers' responses

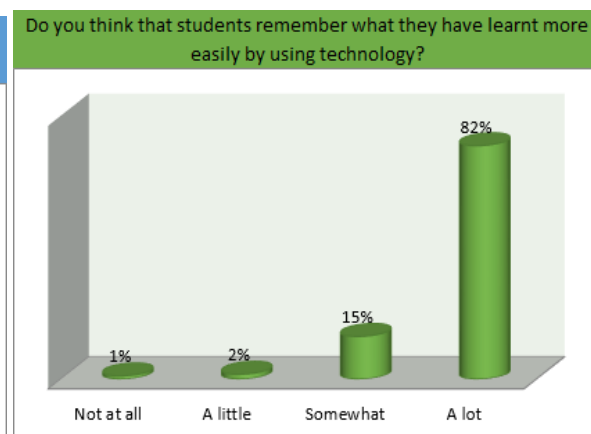


Figure 4 Teachers' responses

Interviews conducted with students and parents point to the same finding. 75% of parents agreed that technology was effective in serving as a teacher's aide to improve reading skills. *“We have seen very good progress in their reading and learning skills and children are now keen to learn lessons and review them at home. Our children are now interested in going to school; we see important progress in our children's learning”* Parent respondent, Kandahar Province.

98% of school principals were enthusiastic about the project and were particularly pleased with the fact that the project gave an opportunity to build their teachers' capacity to use technology to improve their teaching methods and approach.

⁹ Quote from All Children Reading: A Grand Challenge for Development Round 2, January –March 2018, The Asia Foundation Quarterly Report 2



"It (the project) is a good start for us to move towards modernizing our schooling system by adopting or implementing innovative technology to improve early grade reading. The students also seem very interested in their lessons and are attending classes regularly with decreasing rates of absenteeism"
Bibi Hawa High Principal, Nangarhar Province.

Photo Credits: MgtWell Consulting Services, Interview with Bibi Hawa High Principal, Nangarhar Province, 2018

Personnel from the MoE conducted regular assessments of the project in the schools in Nangarhar and found that the project was having a very positive effect on student learning. 70% of MoE staff interviewed believed the project was effective as a teacher-aide in improving reading skills. *"We believe this project is very effective in teaching pupils reading skills and in motivating them in their lesson,"* MoE staff respondent, Nangarhar Province.

The teachers interviewed deemed the content of the reading material provided of good quality. The vocabulary was appropriate for the students' age group, and the content was culturally relevant, with colorful illustrations depicting Afghan culture. It was observed that all reading material (8,206 student workbooks, 4,176 storybooks in Nangarhar and 2,552 in Kandahar), 16 smart HDTVs, 2,700 apps and manuals for parents) was delivered and handed over to target schools in both project provinces—Nangarhar and Kandahar, but the project was delayed for many months. As a result, it was challenging for teachers to go through the project schedule and set activities without disrupting other classroom activities.

4. Has there been an increase in parental engagement in their children's education?

Parental engagement in their children's education has positively increased since the project implementation. The KII highlighted that parents were important stakeholders of the *Using Technology to Improve Primary Reading Skills* project. Initially, parents were approached through the schools and asked to attend training sessions. 2,726 parents received training on the effective use of the new

technology with the aim of supporting their children with literacy skill development at home. Memory cards/chips with the workbooks and e-content/application were distributed to all parents, and they were encouraged to use them with their children at home. Quarterly meetings with parent Shuras took place at the schools between school staff, parents and TAF to follow up on the families' experiences and address any concerns they might have had.

School principals also reiterated the fact that the project has required the establishment of a strong cooperation between the home and the school.

"Parents' training sessions were highly effective and as a result, communication between the schools, teachers, and the parents has increased. Many parents requested our contact information,"¹⁰ School Administrator, Kandahar Province



Photo credits: MgtWell Consulting, School Administrator with mothers, Malalai High School, Kandahar Province, 2018

Some interviews with parents revealed that parents found the project helped them support their children in doing their homework. Some parents also suggested the project was a good tool to improve education levels in the community as a whole.

¹⁰ Quote from All Children Reading: A Grand Challenge for Development Round 2, January–March 2018, *The Asia Foundation Q2 Report*

“In the villages, most parents are illiterate and cannot assist their children with homework tasks. This really hinders the academic progress of children in rural areas. If The Asia Foundation extends their project, it can really support our nation’s students,” Parent respondent, Nangarhar Province.



Photo Credits: MgtWell Consulting, Interview with mothers from Nangarhar Province, 2018

5. What is the impact of using technology as a tool to improve early grade reading?

The use of technology in the classroom has had a positive impact on the quality of pupil learning and on pupils’ enthusiasm for learning. It has transformed the classroom from a traditional learning environment to an environment that is modern and more child-centered. Teachers’ perceptions have been transformed, as they have understood the role that technology can play in facilitating the teaching of literacy and in improving the quality of teaching and learning. Besides enhancing their students’ literacy skills, teachers mention: *“This program not only improve students’ reading and writing. Additionally, it*

improved self-confidence and presentation skills in students in front of the class,”¹¹ Teachers, Kandahar Province.

It is unclear how much time children are spending reading, as there was no mechanism in place to record this information. However, results from the surveys conducted with parents suggest that children are engaging a lot more in reading activities at home compared to before the project implementation. *“Before the project, children were being pushed to complete their homework, but they were not doing it. Now, the children are using the Flash Memory in TVs or smartphones at home and reviewing their lessons independently,”* Parent respondent, Kandahar Province. Children were also keen to share their new enthusiasm for reading and how this has impacted their lives.

“My father was not letting me use his phone, but now he not only brings me storybooks, but he also sits down with me to watch the videos on his phone. We have completed 22 lessons so far.”¹² Tania, 3rd Grade Student, Kandahar Province.



Photo Credits: MgtWell Consulting, Interview with mothers and daughters from Kandahar Province, 2018.

¹¹ Quote from The Asia Foundation, April 2018, *Classroom Library Consultancy Establishment in Kandahar Province Report*

¹² Quote from All Children Reading: A Grand Challenge for Development Round 2, January–March 2018, *The Asia Foundation Q2 Report*

The compatibility level of the developed software with commonly used operating systems (MS, Windows, Android) is high. There were no complaints from the users regarding any technical issues they may have experienced.

6. What are the additional opportunities for using technology to improve access and quality in primary – level education?

Project stakeholders overall gave very positive feedback on the project's use of technology and stressed that **there are many additional opportunities for using technology to improve access and quality in primary level education**. In particular, they expressed the wish to see the project extended and expanded to include more early grade students, as well as to include students all the way up to the 6th grade in all government schools. MoE staff who were approached on this topic found that this new approach to teaching reading skills could be integrated into the national school curriculum.

"Afghanistan needs to adapt to the technological era and adopt technology in schools. Children need to be familiar with technology from a young age," MoE staff respondent, Nangarhar province.



Photo Credits: MgtWell Consulting, Interview with MoE staff, Nangarhar Province, 2018

School principals also believed that this new teaching method to improve reading skills could be adopted by teachers more broadly across the school, and be incorporated into other grades too.

4.0. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This section presents the conclusion and recommendations for The Asia Foundation to consider in relation to extending and expanding the *Using Technology to Improve Primary Grade Reading in Afghanistan* project.

The project offers an innovative solution to improve the reading skills of early grade students in Afghanistan. By providing access to simple technologies and high-interest books via Smart TVs in classes, the project was able to improve current teaching practices in intervention schools to encourage literacy. Students who participated in the project showed significant literacy skill improvement, including increased school attendance, across eight schools in Kandahar and Nangarhar provinces. The project was also successful in ensuring that parents were more engaged in their children's education, thus having a positive impact on the 'home curriculum' too. Communication between parents and schools increased, allowing for an improved home-school collaboration.

The project faced implementation and management challenges that may have impeded its ability to deliver each component with the maximum intended impact. However, it was seen as a very useful complement to the existing literacy teaching approach, and project stakeholders were keen to see the project extended and replicated.

The following are recommendations for The Asia Foundation's consideration when extending its project *Using Technology to Improve Primary Grade Reading in Afghanistan* project into phase 2.

- **Recommendation 1:** Due to the large number of students in each reading skill enhancement classes, a significant number (18%) were keen for more study materials. It is therefore recommended that TAF consider providing a further range of reading materials to enhance the reading corners in the target schools.
- **Recommendation 2:** Findings suggest the project is highly successful not only in promoting literacy, but also in promoting attendance in the target schools – helping overcome two major educational challenges in Afghanistan. Based on these positive findings, it is strongly recommended that the project be sustained and extended to other schools and possibly other grades, so more children can benefit.
- **Recommendation 3:** It is recommended that in the future, a proper stakeholder management strategy be adopted to ensure the project can proceed as per schedule. It is also recommended that regular training take place, especially with teachers who require more supplementary support in using technology. Building the capacity of teachers in usage of ICT would be useful, as the majority had very little exposure to using technology as a teaching aid prior to the project implementation.
- **Recommendation 4:** Research shows a strong correlation between parents' engagement and educational outcomes, including school attendance, behavior, and achievement.¹³ It is

¹³ Boonk, L., Gijsselaers, H. J. M., Ritzen, H., Brand-Gruwel, S., 2018, *A review of the relationship between parental involvement indicators and academic achievement*; Wood L. & Bauman E. (2017), *How family school and community engagement can improve student achievement and influence school reform*.

recommended that the project continue to engage with parents as much as possible, for instance through workshops on the benefits of encouraging reading at home and on parents' role in their children's educational success, through trainings on literacy skills and /or through regular newsletters that children could compile themselves as part of literacy enhancing activities.

- **Recommendation 5:** Positive learning outcomes take place in quality learning environments.¹⁴ It is recommended that teachers be further trained to, where possible, incorporate technology in their teaching and classroom practices. Technology provides an opportunity to engage students in a fun and meaningful way, which could be extended to other aspects of the curriculum and classroom routine. For instance, training could be provided to support teachers integrate the use of technology to teach literacy skills through other general subjects, and to render their teaching more student-centered. This will enhance student participation in their learning and lead to improved learning outcomes.
- **Recommendation 6:** It is strongly recommended that TAF consider creating knowledge products (discussion paper, documentary) on this project, as well as replicating the project to include other sites. Learning generated through the project replication phase could lead to working in close partnership with the MoE to find entry points in the national curriculum for the use of technology to improve early grade reading skills, thus enabling TAF to take the project to scale.

¹⁴ UNICEF, 2000, *Defining Quality in Education*

ANNEXES

- a. Terms of Reference
- b. Timeline (implementation plan)
- c. Data Collection Tools
- d. Fieldwork Photos

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