We live in a world of written words. They are everywhere—from books to bus stops to ballot forms—but only accessible to those on the planet with the ability to read and write. To date, Room to Read’s literacy programs have served more than seven million children, making our world infinitely more accessible for each of those children and their families.

The ability to read and write—unlike speaking or walking—is not hardwired in our brains. These skills must be taught. Without them children are shortchanged for the entirety of their education. True literacy requires practice, a good teacher and an environment where reading is both valued and displayed on a regular basis. Throughout my career in international education, and also at home with my own children, I have witnessed firsthand the effect that these requirements can have on children’s reading habits. I now watch as my three-year-old son begins to develop his early literacy skills—his rapidly developing brain first getting familiar with the concept of books and then starting to associate how books convey information through words on a page. His parents are able to help him with this Herculean task, and he will grow up among a seemingly endless supply of books in his school, the local library and our home. He is one of the lucky ones.

By contrast, many of the students in Room to Read’s partner schools are faced with a very different set of realities. With illiterate parents, under-trained teachers, minimal exposure to age-appropriate books, or school districts that lack proper resources, the odds are stacked against these children to become fluent readers. Yet for these (and all) children, literacy is the key to unlocking a better life. More than the simple ability to read and write, literacy is a gateway to knowledge, a beacon of independence and a basic human right.

I invite you to learn more about our work promoting literacy through the eyes of the students, communities and educators who know it best in the pages of our Literacy Chronicles. These stories are organized by the components that we believe, when combined together, are most important to developing children’s literacy skills and a habit of reading. While each story is unique in the personal circumstances and struggles that shape it, all are bound together by a shared commitment to creating educational change. On behalf of all of us at Room to Read—and the students, librarians, teachers, families and communities we serve—thank you for helping us inspire a new generation of readers.

Sincerely,

Cory Heyman, Chief Program Officer

"TRUE LITERACY REQUIRES PRACTICE, A GOOD TEACHER AND AN ENVIRONMENT WHERE READING IS BOTH VALUED AND DISPLAYED ON A REGULAR BASIS."
Room to Read fosters long-term sustainability by establishing community ownership. We work directly with students, parents, community leaders and local governments, all of whom contribute to a project’s success.

**COMMUNITY & GOVERNMENT PARTNERSHIPS**

**COLLABORATION IS KEY: A COMMUNITY’S COMMITMENT TO SUSTAINABILITY IN NEPAL**

**LASTING CHANGE: ACHIEVING SCALE THROUGH GOVERNMENT COLLABORATION IN ZAMBIA**

**LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS**

Room to Read creates safe, child-friendly school spaces by constructing classroom blocks that alleviate overcrowding and establishing libraries that encourage independent reading.

**CONSTRUCTION ZONE: BRICKS, BOOKS, AND A BETTER FUTURE IN TANZANIA**

**SAFETY FIRST: RENOVATING CLASSROOMS BRINGS STUDENTS BACK TO SCHOOL IN BANGLADESH**

**TEACHER TRAINING & SUPPORT**

Room to Read provides teachers and librarians with professional development and on-site coaching so that they are equipped to support their students in learning to read.

**A VISIT TO MS. MAKWELA’S CLASSROOM: EMPOWERING TEACHERS IN SOUTH AFRICA**

**LIBRARIAN TRAINING: ONE WOMAN’S PASSION SPELLS SUCCESS FOR A LIBRARY IN VIETNAM**

**MONITORING & EVALUATION**

Room to Read maintains program quality by emphasizing extensive research, monitoring and evaluation across all areas of operation.

**TECHNOLOGY PILOT: TRACKING PROGRESS IN SRI LANKA**

**KEEPING THE BOOKS: A CLOSER LOOK AT BOOK CHECKOUT PATTERNS IN LAOS**
READING MATERIALS
Children’s books did not exist when Chinith Chou was a child. Born in 1985, Chinith, along with the rest of his generation, came of age at a time when children’s literature in Cambodia had disappeared.

“All the books were text only—they did not have pictures,” says Chinith. But what might be considered dour reads for most, Chinith devoured with enthusiasm. “Some of the books included folktales, and I especially liked reading those stories.”

Those bits of Khmer folklore became a jumping-off point for Chinith. The stories inspired him to dream tales of his own.

“After reading the books, my imagination came alive,” Chinith says, his usually reserved demeanor giving way to a more effusive air. “I would imagine that something can fly, and draw it. Sometimes I did not have paper for drawing, so I would just draw on the ground.”

EARLY SUCCESS
At age 14, Chinith heard about a fiction-writing competition sponsored by UNICEF for students and teachers. He had never written or illustrated a complete story before.

“When I got the UNICEF announcement, the ideas just came to me. So I wrote and drew, wrote and drew, and that was the beginning.”

Chinith’s submissions were based on whimsical and familiar plot lines: a hunter learns about the value of life after caring for an orphaned monkey; a deer learns about independence and the importance of parental advice after striking out on his own. One of Chinith’s stories placed third and his other three submissions made the top 10.

Despite his passion for writing and his success at an early age, Chinith set writing aside and decided to become a teacher, like his father. He earned a teaching degree and taught Khmer language and civics at a secondary school in his home province of Battambang.

Before long, wishing to advance his knowledge, Chinith enrolled at the Royal University of Phnom Penh to pursue a master’s degree in linguistics. It was there he learned that Room to Read was holding a writers’ and illustrators’ workshop for qualified candidates, so he applied.

RETURNING TO HIS ROOTS
Rattana Huy, who manages our Book Publishing program in Cambodia, saw Chinith, who also holds a bachelor’s degree in Khmer literature, as a perfect fit for the workshop.

“Every year we look for people who have talent, but do not have the opportunity to publish their stories,” she says. “At the end of each workshop, we select some of the best stories for publication.”

Like Chinith, Rattana grew up without children’s books. The stories of her youth came from Russian television shows, imported by the pro-Soviet Vietnamese who ousted the Khmer Rouge in 1979. Rattana did not even know...
CHINITH AND OTHER WRITERS LIKE HIM, WITH HELP FROM ROOM TO READ, ARE RECONSTRUCTING WHAT WAS AN ALL-BUT-EXTINCT PUBLISHING INDUSTRY WITH THE AIM OF PLACING BOOKS PRECISELY WHERE THEY CAN DO THE MOST GOOD.
that children’s books existed until she was 24 years old, when she began working in the publishing business. She soon discovered that very few children’s books were being published in the Khmer language.

“When I meet with publishers, they say that they cannot make a big profit from children’s books,” she says. “The reading habits of children are better than before, but that is mostly in the urban areas.”

Rattana and her team are working overtime to close the gap. As Rattana puts it, “We never have low season; it’s always high season. When I first started at Room to Read, we published only 12 stories a year, but in 2011 and 2012, we published 25 titles.”

When they met, Rattana saw Chinith as an especially strong candidate because he was studying linguistics, which would be a great help when writing books intended to reinforce a Khmer language studies curriculum. “And one more plus,” adds Rattana. “He can both write and draw.”

For Chinith, getting to meet Room to Read’s expert facilitators, and being in the presence of mature authors, helped him get over any lingering self-doubt about his stories.

While writing children’s books may be difficult enough, writing books designed to fit into and reinforce a particular curriculum comes with its own challenges. Room to Read Cambodia cooperates with the Royal Government’s Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport to tailor its books to the needs of children in the earliest grade levels, those least served by Cambodia’s nascent commercial publishing industry. At the workshop Chinith attended, participants were asked to write about topics that linked to the 2nd or 3rd grade geography curriculum, where children learn directional words.

Chinith distinguished himself as an especially active participant, and at the end of the workshop, three of his stories were selected for publication.

Chinith’s story *Help Me Find the Sun* was his first book published by Room to Read Cambodia. In it, a group of animals play hide and seek with the sun. The sun, as the seeker, wins handily, and passes on the seeking duties to a rabbit. But by the time the rabbit finds all of her friends, the sun has set, so she organizes a search party to find it.

“She tried to look for the sun at the left and right of the house, in the north and in the west, but in the evening, she still could not find the sun,” says Chinith, describing how the story incorporates the directional terms required by the national curriculum. The friends, of course, ultimately find the sun when it rises in the east.

**REBUILDING AN INDUSTRY**

Room to Read’s authors face an added challenge beyond the restrictive curriculum. In creating and publishing literature for children, they are rebuilding an industry destroyed by years of conflict. Today, Chinith and other writers like him, with help from Room to Read, are reconstructing what was an all-but-extinct publishing industry with the aim of placing books precisely where they can do the most good.

In 1975, when the Khmer Rouge regime seized power in Cambodia, literacy became an offense punishable by death. The ideology was a massive failure, succeeding only in destroying the nation’s infrastructure, killing some 1.7 million Cambodians and leaving the country’s educated population in shambles.

Today, more than 35 years later, many gaps still remain in developing the tools needed for children to develop literacy. One area where this is particularly true is in texts designed for early readers. To fill this void, Room to Read has begun producing “decodable books,” simple drawings with minimal words and sentences that reinforce lessons step-by-step.
Decodable books present a unique challenge for writers—who are often allowed to use only 11 new words per book, but Rattana says Chinith is an ideal writer for this type of material. “Since Chinith was a primary school teacher and has a background in linguistics, combining these talents makes him a natural,” she says.

CLOSING GAPS AND REAPING REWARDS

Room to Read is also publishing books aimed at combatting Cambodia’s severe gender gap. By utilizing what is known as the “gender lens,” Room to Read seeks to subtly reinforce the idea that students’ aspirations aren’t limited by their gender. Initially, getting these new books approved by the government was a bit of a struggle.

“The first time we presented writing through a gender lens, it became an issue,” says Rattana. “The story was about a girl who dreamed of driving a big truck. At first this story was not approved by the government. ‘How can a girl want to drive a big truck?’ they asked us. But they eventually got on board and now they even participate in our gender lens writers’ workshops.”

An equally significant gap is in books about science. As Rattana points out, “Children’s book publishing has increased in Cambodia, but it is all fiction stories—not science books, not nonfiction. Children do not have any idea about science since they do not have books on it.” To begin filling the science gap, Room to Read has translated more than 40 English-language science books into Khmer through a partnership with Scholastic. While the translation itself is arduous, cultural considerations also have to be taken into account.

“For example,” Rattana notes, “a book about hygiene had a picture of Western children in a bathtub. But in Cambodia, in rural areas, the children do not know what a tub is. Room to Read took a culturally appropriate photo of the ubiquitous Khmer-style water jar and inserted that instead.”

Room to Read’s attention to detail is reaping rewards. In 2012, Help Me Find the Sun was named Best Children’s Book by the International Board on Books for Young People Cambodia, leading a field that included all Khmer children’s literature published since 2009. Room to Read was also recognized by King Norodom Sihamoni, Cambodia’s constitutional monarch, who awarded the organization the Royal Awards for its contributions to Cambodia’s educational system.

For Rattana, however, one thing motivates her even more than the awards. “When I go to the schools we work with, I smile when I see that the children like our books,” she says. “I watch the children go into the library during their free time, and out of all the books at their fingertips, they choose those published by Room to Read Cambodia, so I know we are doing our job.”

HELP ME FIND THE SUN

By Chinith Chou

A GROUP OF ANIMALS PLAY HIDE AND SEEK WITH THE SUN.

The sun, as the seeker, wins handily, and passes on the seeking duties to a rabbit. Though the rabbit finds all of her friends, the sun has set, and the gang organizes a search party. She tried to look for the sun at the left and right of the house, in the north and in the west, but in the evening, she still cannot find the sun. In the morning, she finally finds the sun when it rises in the east.
Not long ago, the walls in the teachers’ room at the Ne-giguda Primary School were a faded white, with large cracks from lack of fresh paint and care. But when, with the help of Room to Read, the room was converted into the school’s library in 2010, the once-dull walls were given a new lease on life with a fresh coat of bright yellow paint, hanging canvas bookshelves at eye level for the still-growing student body and sturdy wooden bookshelves to house the library’s 800 books in both Hindi and English.

Before the library was established, Ms. Golda Vijaylaxmi says she would see many children dropping out of school or skipping classes. But now, “the retention rate has increased since the library has been set up in our school,” she says proudly. “And I have personally been reading more from the interesting books provided by Room to Read. I use the library books to teach the children on subjects such as the environment, math, science and language apart from what is available in the school textbooks.”

The veteran teacher explains. “A good library is a boon for the children. It plays the role of an additional teacher for the school and that too is very effective. The students enjoy reading independently and finding books they can borrow to read at home with their family.”

To keep the library clean and the books in usable condition, Ms. Vijaylaxmi instituted a rule that everyone must remove their shoes while in the library. She has also covered the books with special gelatin sheets to minimize wear-and-tear. On special occasions, she decorates the library with posters that not only pep up the room but also help promote healthy reading habits.

Each year in celebration of the Vasant Panchami springtime festival honoring Saraswati Puja, the goddess of knowledge, Ms. Vijaylaxmi adds special decorations to the entire library and hangs mobiles from the ceiling depicting well-known book characters. Last year she also prepared new charts with library rules using the color yellow, the main color associated with the festival, to mark a fresh beginning to the reading season.

“The decorations help attract children into the library but it is the books that hook them to a lifelong love of reading,” she says.

One student, 3rd grader Manisha, is a perfect example. Manisha has transformed herself—becoming a library regular and a better student. “I come to school so that I can read the stories. I love the colors in the room. I do not make excuses like I did before to avoid school,” Manisha says with a shy smile.

Ms. Vijaylaxmi is thrilled that her classroom has now become livelier and the children more active. Before, she recalls, “After having their mid-day meal, the children would run out of school and not return for the second-half classes. Now, the children are much more involved and the library has become their favorite place—it allows them the opportunity and freedom to lay their hands on wonderful story books as never before.

“In my 20 years of teaching, the past three years have been the most fruitful. It makes me happy to see the children learn and have fun at the same time.”

“The decorations help attract children into the library but it is the books that hook them to a lifelong love of reading.”
LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS
CONSTRUCTION ZONE: 
BRICKS, BOOKS AND A BETTER 
FUTURE IN TANZANIA

When the new classroom block and first-ever school library opened earlier this year at Manyinga Primary School, the transformation was immediate. In their own words, hear from three people in the community who saw it firsthand.

The community surrounding Manyinga Primary School is remote, and the challenges the school has faced are nearly ubiquitous in the rural Mvomero district. Overcrowded and under-resourced, the school’s truancy rates are high. Most families depend on subsistence farming, with the area’s primary industry confined to seasonal labor at the local sugar factory and the plantations that feed it.

When the village government convened a meeting to discuss partnering with Room to Read, the reaction was overwhelmingly positive. Despite their own individual struggles, parents from the school immediately agreed to contribute materials. The prospect of increasing the quality of education seemed invaluable.

OVERNIGHT TRANSFORMATION
By Salum Hemba, head teacher

I arrived at primary school all the way through business school with few difficulties. I was lucky to have parents who supported my studies. Here in Turiani, the situation is completely different. People here are hard workers and value education, but they have trouble sending their children to school.

I became a teacher because I love it, but the challenges for our school are numerous. Before Room to Read came here, we had an average class size of 95 students and many classes had to be divided into two sessions to accommodate all of the children. Knowing that students here are already at a disadvantage, it was a shame for them to be allowed only five periods per day rather than the usual seven.

When we learned that Room to Read would come to our school to build new classrooms and a library, I called a parents’ meeting and everyone committed to contribute on the spot—agreeing to collect two bricks every month per family for five months. Several of the most active parents formed a construction committee to help oversee the project. The school’s students even decided to help out, collecting a single stone for the building each morning on their way to school.

All that work was worth it because the new building has really changed things. Now all the students can sit comfortably in their desks and get all of their subjects in. Each day, one class has their designated library period, which is a new addition to our school timetable. It’s even helped to reduce truancy, with school attendance rising 20 percent since we opened the library.

I encourage all my students to read as much as possible so that they can excel in their studies and in life. I tell them that education is important because it helps them learn new ways of thinking and doing things. Education will help Tanzanian children build our nation.

LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS: Succeeding in school starts with having a safe, child-friendly place to learn that fuels children’s imaginations. We partner with communities to invest in infrastructure projects such as constructing or repairing classroom blocks that alleviate overcrowding and establishing libraries that encourage independent reading.

The new building at Manyinga Primary School holds three classrooms and a school library. In front, outdoor reading pagodas provide additional space to enjoy the books from the library.
A WARM AND INVITING energy fills the room, as late morning sun streams through ample windows. At the front of the classroom, the teacher, Ms. Kimbuga, begins today’s science lesson, an introduction to the many living creatures found near lakes, rivers and streams. As she speaks, she moves about the room, checking to ensure each pair of students is following along in their shared textbook.

In the afternoon, it’s time for library period. Outfitted with brand new shelving, Kiswahili-language books, posters and educational games, the room is full of eager readers. Two groups of students gather around one of the posters hung on the wall, taking turns naming the animals pictured. A few yards away, their classmates sit on brightly colored mats and chairs, devouring books color-coded for their reading level. “These are the ones I can read,” exclaims one girl, barely audible above the sound of excited conversations in Kiswahili, Zigua and Nguu. As she makes her selection, other children hurry to check out their favorite titles while the next class lines up outside, eager for their turn in the library.

As a parent, I want my children to reach their goals. Right now, Arnold wants to be a priest and Anita dreams of becoming a teacher. We are trying to support them as much as we can. I hope that they grow up to be independent and good citizens.

A MOTHER’S PRAYER
By Felician Kimanzi, mother and member of the school construction committee

I have five children. Two of them, Arnold and Anita, attend Manyinga Primary School. My youngest daughter will also go to this school one day, but she is only four years old now. Their education is very important to me because I know it will help them find a job or start their own business. I am a tailor in this village, so I know that even self-employed people need a good education to be successful.

When I heard about Room to Read I was happy because our school is old and there are so many students. Our prayers had been answered! I was chosen to be on the construction committee, which meant spending many days at the school ensuring that the work went on well and kept on schedule.

The new classrooms are very strong. They are big, too, which allows more air to pass through. I think the children like the bright interiors best.

My children often bring home story books from the library now that it is open, and I ask them to read aloud to their younger sister. Sometimes I even go to the library myself to read for a while.

A DAY IN 3RD GRADE AT MANYINGA PRIMARY SCHOOL

A warm and inviting energy fills the room, as late morning sun streams through ample windows. At the front of the classroom, the teacher, Ms. Kimbuga, begins today’s science lesson, an introduction to the many living creatures found near lakes, rivers and streams. As she speaks, she moves about the room, checking to ensure each pair of students is following along in their shared textbook.

In the afternoon, it’s time for library period. Outfitted with brand new shelving, Kiswahili-language books, posters and educational games, the room is full of eager readers. Two groups of students gather around one of the posters hung on the wall, taking turns naming the animals pictured. A few yards away, their classmates sit on brightly colored mats and chairs, devouring books color-coded for their reading level. “These are the ones I can read,” exclaims one girl, barely audible above the sound of excited conversations in Kiswahili, Zigua and Nguu. As she makes her selection, other children hurry to check out their favorite titles while the next class lines up outside, eager for their turn in the library.

ABC AND 123
By Anita, 5th grade student

When I grow up I want to be a teacher. I love coming to school, especially to visit the library. One day I will become a mathematics teacher and help children learn their numbers. It’s important because mathematics is everywhere, like at the market when you have to count your change.

Reading is very important too, because it helps people stay safe. For example, you need to be able to read a “No Crossing” sign on the road—otherwise you’ll be in trouble! I visit the new library three or four times every week to borrow books or read on my own. The day I first saw the new building, I felt proud of my school. Then when I got to go into the library for the first time, I was so excited that I couldn’t decide which story to read first! Each book has a different and interesting story inside of it.

“I ENCOURAGE ALL MY STUDENTS TO READ AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE SO THAT THEY CAN EXCEL IN THEIR STUDIES AND IN LIFE . . . EDUCATION WILL HELP TANZANIAN CHILDREN BUILD OUR NATION.”
SAFETY FIRST:

RENOVATING CLASSROOMS BRINGS STUDENTS BACK TO SCHOOL IN BANGLADESH

One primary school is transformed back into a safe learning environment, with help from Room to Read.

A year ago, Basegathi Primary School was severely overcrowded, but not for the reasons one might think. Unlike many other schools in the surrounding area that lack the space to accommodate all of their students, Basegathi Primary’s five classrooms should have been enough for everyone. Unfortunately, an entire building—which holds three of the school’s five classrooms—was unfit for use.

Weather was the culprit. It’s a common problem across the Sirajganj district of Bangladesh—the ever-changing weather and remote nature of the area’s sandbar islands make infrastructure a major challenge. At Basegathi Primary, the damaged building meant squeezing all 272 students in 1st through 5th grade into the school’s two usable classrooms. When rains were heavy, classes were held in other buildings adjacent to the school. Frustrated by the conditions, many teachers sought employment at other government schools—leaving Basegathi Primary with a near constant shortage of teachers.

Historically, Room to Read’s construction projects have been focused on new classroom blocks for crowded schools. But in 2011 we began to work with schools like Basegathi Primary as well, where adequate physical space exists but does not offer a productive learning environment. At less than half the cost of new construction, these projects transform the day-to-day operations of a school—turning shabby, once-empty buildings into first-rate classroom spaces.

For the community’s school construction committee and Room to Read, the renovation began by tackling the basic safety issues affecting the vacant, deteriorating three-classroom building—reinforcing the brick walls, repairing the roof and flooring, and replacing broken or missing windows. After construction was complete, the interior of each classroom received a fresh coat of paint, new desks and benches, wall-to-wall blackboards and shelving for books and other reading materials. The result is an environment wholly conducive to children’s learning.

As with all Room to Read construction projects, the local community contributed a significant portion of the total cost—more than 20 percent—an investment that is already having an effect. Students are eager to attend class in the beautiful new classrooms, and in turn, the school no longer has a problem retaining teachers. As word has spread in the area about Basegathi Primary’s newly renovated classrooms, several families from nearby communities have transferred their children to the school, which now has more than enough room for all of its eager young learners.
TEACHER TRAINING & SUPPORT
A VISIT TO MS. MAKWELA’S CLASSROOM:
EMPOWERING TEACHERS
IN SOUTH AFRICA

Nearly one-fourth of the students at Mohwelere Primary School have been orphaned by AIDS, and the surrounding community is wracked by unemployment, high illiteracy and poverty. But you wouldn’t know it from the energy in Ms. Makwela’s 1st grade classroom!

After starting the lesson with a song and telling a short story, Ms. Makwela holds up a white card with the letter “h” printed on it, encouraging her young Sepedi-speaking students to repeat the sound. Earlier in the year, the primary focus was on building vocabulary, but now students are starting to learn to build simple words from various sounds as well. Reinforcing the sound, Ms. Makwela introduces new words—leho (ladle), lehono (today), lehodu (thief)—and the class repeats them, emphasizing the “h” sound in each.

Ms. Makwela learned these teaching techniques through Room to Read’s Reading & Writing Instruction program. Designed to provide teachers with the training and materials they need to help their students develop literacy skills, the program is now being implemented in her school’s 1st and 2nd grade classrooms. Since joining the Reading & Writing Instruction program in 2012, Ms. Makwela has transformed her classroom from an intimidating place of rote memorization into an inviting print-rich environment, learned how to facilitate peer-to-peer learning and discovered new methods for delivering child-centered lessons in Sepedi.

In a conversation with Room to Read staff, Ms. Makwela talks about how the new approach has spurred change in her classroom.

TEACHER TRAINING & SUPPORT: Helping children go from matching sounds with print, to decoding individual words, to a level of fluency that allows for comprehension is a mighty task. We provide teachers and librarians with professional development and on-site coaching so that they are equipped to support their students’ learning.
Describe your childhood. Did you face any challenges in completing school?

Ms. Makwela: I am the second child in a family of nine. Because my father was unemployed, my mother had to do multiple jobs to put food on the table. At school, I had trouble learning to read. This made most subjects difficult for me—especially in high school. Then one day I joined a study group that helped me a lot. I did well after that.

How did you decide to become a teacher?

Ms. Makwela: The students in my study group encouraged me to lead discussions, and I enjoyed it very much. That experience helped me discover my passion for teaching for the first time.

What has changed in your classroom since joining the Reading & Writing Instruction program?

Ms. Makwela: Before, I didn't really know how to facilitate my lessons effectively. The way I was doing things was intimidating to my students. They saw me as a stranger then, but now I am more like a mother. My old lessons were not as explicit, because I had never learned the proper sequence for teaching reading and writing skills. I did not enjoy my work at all and so I felt much less motivated. Since the training I did with Room to Read, I feel so much more at ease in the classroom—it is like a cloud was removed from the sky above me! My students’ performance has improved tremendously, which definitely boosted my self esteem.

What are your lessons like now?

Ms. Makwela: I plan my lessons to incorporate all the skills children need, and plan activities so that they, too, are participating in the lessons. I make “big books” and flash cards to introduce new sounds each week.

Does your classroom look different?

Ms. Makwela: Yes! I have a very print-rich classroom now—with posters, books, and words all over. I try to incorporate those things into my lessons as well. We have a reading corner and a nature corner for the children to explore.

How have these changes affected your students’ performance?

Ms. Makwela: My students now participate fully during their lessons. They have learned how to decode sounds and can read words on their own now. Some of the more advanced students can even read and write simple sentences during the first term, skills we would normally not expect until the last term. It is awesome!

How is this different from the learning environment when you went to school?

Ms. Makwela: It used to be that we were only taught to memorize information—not to understand it. Now everything is much more learner-centered.

Do you ever visit the library with your class?

Ms. Makwela: We observe a library period once per week and do many activities there. Usually, we read story books together to reinforce the sounds learned in class. We also play word games. For this activity, I divide my students into groups and give them different activities based on their ability level. When the group comes back together as one, we sing songs and practice alliterations and rhymes. It’s fun!

What do you wish for your students in the future?

Ms. Makwela: I want my students to become independent readers. There are 21 letters in Sepedi, and if my students can master them all then it will be possible for them to learn any other language they wish—English in particular, since it uses the same letters.

When my students become fluent readers and writers, I will know for sure they can succeed, and that, in turn, will break the cycle of poverty within their families.
“I DIDN’T REALLY KNOW HOW TO FACILITATE MY LESSONS EFFECTIVELY. THE WAY I WAS DOING THINGS BEFORE WAS INTIMIDATING TO MY STUDENTS. THEY SAW ME AS A STRANGER THEN, BUT NOW I AM MORE LIKE A MOTHER.”
MEET TWO OF MS. MAKWELA’S STUDENTS

BONOLO, 6 YEARS OLD

What is your favorite part about 1st grade?
BonoLO: In the beginning I had problems reading words and I was very nervous because I wasn’t used to the teacher. Now I like reading and writing a lot.

What is it like in your classroom?
BonoLO: It is fun because we play while we are learning.

What is your favorite activity?
BonoLO: I like singing, alliterations and rhymes.

Do you ever check out books from the library?
BonoLO: Yes, I checked out a book about monkeys and took it home to read it.

Describe a time when you felt proud of yourself.
BonoLO: I once read at the assembly in front of the whole school and when I finished they all clapped.

MALEBO, 8 YEARS OLD

Describe your family.
Malebo: I live with my granny because my mom works in the city. My granny is old and she can’t read.

What is your favorite part of school?
Malebo: I like to read and perform in dramas.

What do you like best about 1st grade?
Malebo: I am happy because I know all the sounds...like h, m, l, n and p.

Tell me about your teacher. What is she like?
Malebo: Ms. Makwela is very good to us. She teaches us, dances with us and gives us food to eat. When I answer a question she says “good girl!” and I feel on top of the moon.

“When my students become fluent readers and writers, I will know for sure they can succeed, and that, in turn, will break the cycle of poverty within their families.”
It's 9:30 on a hot, steamy summer morning at Ngu Hiep 1 Primary School. Classes are out of session for the summer, but the library is still open for students—a safe place to learn and play. The librarian, Ms. Giang, looks around at the many boys and girls who have come to the library this morning and smiles.

A former English teacher and avid reader, Ms. Giang asked to be transferred to this school after it received a Room to Read library so that she could become the school’s first full-time librarian. Here is her story:

“I grew up with books and my husband loves reading, too. My favorite books are like best friends, so I volunteered to take care of the library even though it is a lot of work and pays less than teaching. Because I was trained as a teacher, I did not have all the technical skills of a librarian, so the library management training that Room to Read gave me was very helpful.

Since Room to Read established this library, the school has improved a lot. Children read better, their writing is more creative—it’s so encouraging for me! I have so much passion for my work, and I am able to apply lots of new ideas into the library.

Other people have started to appreciate the library more, too. We organized a Reading Day celebration for the community to come and enjoy the library, and since then I have seen many parents come in to check out books when they pick up their children from school. I always encourage them to borrow even more. Nowadays it seems everyone sees the importance of having a library.”

When you come into the room, you will see that we have many books with a panda stamp on them. Those are books the children and teachers have helped to purchase. Room to Read has already given us lots of books, but that alone is not sustainable. Every year I ask the teachers to set aside 50,000 dong (US$0.25) to buy more. I also encourage any children who can do so to bring in 1,000 dong (US$0.05) every two months or so, and then I buy more books for the library with the money.

I bring receipts for the books to school meetings for the parents and teachers to see how many new books have been purchased from their efforts. I also mark the books with the panda stamp and categorize each one based on the grade-appropriate reading levels that I learned about in my Room to Read training on book leveling. When the children see the panda on a book they are reading, it makes them so proud to know that they made it possible with their donation.

It is important, of course, for the books to be interesting, but the illustrations and type size are equally important, especially for young readers. The children also learn important skills in the library in addition to practicing their reading. We even have a storytelling corner where they practice their reading comprehension and public speaking skills. They come to the library not only to read, but also to grow up.

Ms. Giang shifted her career path to help thousands of students discover a love of reading.
COMMUNITY & GOVERNMENT PARTNERSHIPS
On the first day of school at Shree Maharaja Lower Secondary School, the library is abuzz with activity. At the start of each academic year, this school—along with more than a thousand others across Nepal—receives a new shipment of books for the library, and this year was no exception. New copies of Nepali-language children’s books published by Room to Read came in fresh from the printer—their brightly animated covers and crisp pages were ready and waiting for new friends to discover them.

Opening day at this library finds the youngest students on one side of the room with a copy of *The Lion and the Rabbit* propped between them. The story features a brave little rabbit who uses wit to defeat the ruler of the jungle. The book’s colorful illustrations and large font make learning new words fun for emerging bookworms.

In another corner stands one of the older students, animatedly reading aloud to friends in what seems like an exclusive storytelling circle. Today he is acting out the story from *Dog and Bear Go to the Moon*, depicting the space adventure of two animal explorers.

Making Space for Learning

Three decades ago, Shree Maharaja Lower Secondary School was just a makeshift blackboard pinned to a poplar tree, says Raj Kumar Shrestha, who studied there in the early days. “We studied under the open skies,” he recalls. “We did not even have proper books and studied from what our teacher, a retired army major, wrote on our slates.”

Over time, the community worked together to build a school that sheltered students from Nepal’s monsoons...
Community & Government Partnerships

Top, left to right: Children explore the library’s inspiration wall; Seema, the student library manager; students sweep the floor before the library opens.

Bottom: 8th grade students help younger children check out books.
and hot summer days. After construction was complete, the school was still lacking in many areas, without a library or sufficient classroom space for more than 100 students. In 2010, Room to Read partnered with Shree Maharaja to improve those conditions.

First came the construction of a school library, followed by the addition of a new two-story classroom block to alleviate overcrowding. Both projects drew inspiration from the school’s history of collaboration, with the school administration, local community and Room to Read staff working closely together. “All of us felt immensely proud to continue the work our parents had started,” says Raj Kumar Shrestha. “Room to Read helped us to pave the way forward when they helped us to construct our school—the new rooms are much better than the ones we studied in.”

SETTING UP FOR SUSTAINABILITY

Before the library even opened for the first time this year, Shree Maharaja’s new class of 8th grade students began their new assignment as volunteer managers. One group swept the floor to rid it of the dried leaves that had been carried in by the previous night’s wind. Another set of students stacked colorful cushions so they looked inviting for other children to use as a quiet reading corner.

The more experienced students, those who had volunteered in the library before, taught others how to run the checkout log—demonstrating how the loan system works and how to get returned books back on the bookshelves as quickly as possible. When the prep work was complete, it was time to flip open the lending register and declare the library open for business.

“Students volunteering to manage the library indicates that the community is owning the project,” says Suva Rana, who provides library management training and support to Shree Maharaja on behalf of Room to Read. “From the start, we advocate for project sustainability. It’s really heartening to see the school grasp and act on it.”

“Initially, we were stretched thin between holding classes and managing the library,” says Laxman Thapa, the school’s librarian. “With the students’ help, the workload has slowly eased and allowed us to better manage our library’s day-to-day functions.”

Seema, 14, leads the student group responsible for daily library management, which includes dusting the bookshelves, organizing the books by reading level and updating the check-out register. In addition, each month the group produces an Inspiration Wall—stories written by the students, which they post in the library for the school community to read.

Seema recalls how one Inspiration Wall story about child marriage helped her and her friends support a classmate who was at risk. “When our friend stopped coming to school,” Seema says, “we found out that her parents wanted her to quit school to get married. We went to the family’s house and told them about the risks of early marriage and how education is important for a meaningful life.”

“It was difficult to convince the parents at first,” she admits. “They wouldn’t listen. We told them numerous real-life stories we had read in the library and it opened their eyes.” Seema’s friend returned to school the next day and she credits the Inspiration Wall for empowering her friends to take action.

“I read a lot of biography books,” says Seema, who believes that reading about her heroes has given her the courage to speak out about social issues. “I look up to Florence Nightingale for inspiration and, like her, I want to become a nurse.”
A SHARED COMMITMENT TO QUALITY EDUCATION

Space to learn and access to books weren’t the only challenges facing Shree Maharaja’s students in developing a habit and a love of reading. Nepal’s traditional teacher-centric methodology for teaching—pervasive across many countries in the developing world—left little opportunity for students to gain the early literacy skills required for comprehension. Once again, partnership was the solution.

Through Room to Read Nepal’s Reading & Writing Instruction program, 1st grade and 2nd grade teachers learn how to adapt their teaching techniques and use child-friendly materials to make their lessons more student-focused. Seeking to provide all early-grade students with the foundation they need to become lifelong learners, Shree Maharaja joined the program in 2011.

The early Reading & Writing Instruction classes were just 45 minutes in length, but Room to Read Nepal worked with the district education office to increase the classes to 90 minutes. Our team also began holding parent meetings to help families understand the importance of literacy and support their children in practicing their reading skills at home.

Bimala Shrestha and Sita Adhikari teach 1st and 2nd grade, respectively. Both were trained through Room to Read’s Reading & Writing Instruction program. “You can see the excitement in the students’ faces when we teach with new resources such as big books,” says Sita. “The large illustrations draw students’ attention, making it easy to teach. The training we received also helped us to adopt a teaching approach that focuses on the students.”

“We have seen drastic improvement in our students after we implemented the program,” she adds. “They quickly pick up the basics and retain what they have learned.”

Bimala, who has a bachelor’s degree in education, agrees. “Students do respond well when lessons are more engaging, student centric, and fun,” she says.

After teachers like Sita and Bimala reported dramatic changes in their students’ performance, Nepal’s Ministry of Education took notice and committed to incorporating practices from Room to Read’s program into the national program for training primary school teachers. This new level of cooperation promises to take the impact felt by Sita and Bimala’s students far beyond the walls of Shree Maharaja Lower Secondary School.
Vincent Zyambo hardly had to voice his welcome to me. The sparkle in his eyes and joy in his tone were sufficient. He ushered me into his large but cozy office and made sure I was sufficiently comfortable before taking a seat behind his massive wood desk. After settling in, he immediately began to speak about the 8,000 1st and 2nd grade students and 30 schools Room to Read has helped with literacy instruction—more than half of the schools in his district.

Kafue town is an hour’s drive from our capital of Lusaka and the district estimates a population of 170,000. For our part, Room to Read supports 44 school libraries in the district and 800 girls from six of the local schools.

“Kafue is privileged to have been among the first districts in the country to receive Room to Read’s support,” Vincent said, beaming with pride. “As we travel to monitor our schools, we have noticed how excited our learners are with the library resources.”

Vincent and I talked about Room to Read’s contributions to the development of Zambia’s education system—Kafue in particular—through the construction and establishment of libraries, provision of books, support of girls’ education and training of teachers. As one of the program managers for our Cinyanja-language Reading & Writing Instruction program, I was especially proud to hear him talk about the program’s significant effect on the government curriculum.

“When this program,” Vincent stressed, “learning reading and writing in Cinyanja has become faster, easier and more enjoyable for the children. By the end of Grade 1 last year, we noted a surprising number of learners who were able to read and write at their level. This is remarkable because most of these learners use other languages at home instead of Cinyanja.”

Last June, Vincent and I participated in the first National Literacy Symposium, jointly sponsored by the Ministry of Education, UNICEF and Room to Read. Room to Read’s positive impact was highlighted so much that Dr. John Phiri, the Minister of Education, felt obligated to visit a school in Kafue to see for himself what was happening on the ground.

“When the minister visited Shikoswe School,” said Vincent as a smile spread across his face, “a Grade 1 child demonstrated his reading and his ability to form words from a syllable chart—then asked the minister to do the same. After obliging, the minister proceeded to write new words in Cinyanja and asked the boy to read them, which he did easily. Dr. Phiri was amazed because it was unusual to see a 1st grader read within the first six months of the year.” Ordinarily, these students would not begin to read and write confidently until 3rd or 4th grade.

When I asked Vincent about Room to Read’s most significant contribution to literacy development, his response was quick and precise: “It has changed the teachers’ work attitude and perception of their learners. They see how all these interventions, woven together, help children perform better in the classroom. This is a remarkable achievement for us.”

As our brief time together came to an end, Vincent relaxed back in his seat. It was time for me to leave for the day, but we both knew that the future would hold many more collaborations.
MONITORING & EVALUATION
“Good morning to you!” A chorus of cheerful 1st grade voices fills the air as guests enter the room with tablet computers in hand. The young teacher, who stands at the head of the room, lets out a quiet smile before redirecting the students’ attention back to the day’s lesson.

“Kaiveesamma Kaiveesu (move your hands),” she sings aloud in Tamil. As the students join her song, Ms. Ranajani glides across the room toward a pile of fruit, selecting each item and holding it aloft as it is named in her song. As the students begin to call out the name of each item, the teacher circulates around the brightly colored room, her sari contrasting with the vivid posters and word charts on the walls.

It’s clear from observing her classroom at work that Ms. Ranajani’s students are fully engaged in the lessons. In one activity, she holds up colorful placards featuring clouds, a dancer, and a swan, respectively, and children shout out the corresponding words eagerly. As she leads her class in breaking apart these words into their individual sounds, or phonemes, the children’s participation only grows.

Later, Ms. Ranajani introduces the letter her students will work on today, “இ” (pronounced “nha”). She asks each child to simulate writing the letter in the air and circulates the room to help those who require more support. Then she asks more advanced students to demonstrate writing the letter in sand at the corner of the room, each one smiling proudly after completing the task.

TEACHING IN TAMIL

Though Ms. Ranajani was fortunate enough to attend one of the most prestigious schools in the area for her own education, she chose to become a teacher at Invery Tamil School so she could help pass that education along to less-fortunate students. “Tamil is the language of this community; they speak in Tamil at home,” she says. “Learning in one’s mother tongue means access to one’s culture and literature—it binds people. Without a good knowledge of the Tamil language, these children will be rootless.”

MONITORING & EVALUATION:

Extensive research, monitoring and evaluation are key to ensuring program quality. Our work in this area includes regular monitoring of thousands of individual projects in addition to strategic research and rigorous, multi-country evaluations that provide an objective assessment of our impact.
Through the Reading & Writing Instruction program, Ms. Ranajani has received detailed training, colorful materials and ongoing coaching from Room to Read. She has also learned how to track each individual student’s progress in order to help them become fluent readers, and has already witnessed great improvement. “Now children can quickly identify words when we show them pictures,” she says, “and when asked to write a letter they can do so without waiting for the teacher’s demonstration.”

ADVANCING STUDENT ASSESSMENTS

While teachers’ ongoing informal assessment of their students is crucial, Room to Read also conducts more rigorous, quantitative assessments as well. By testing the reading fluency skills of students in our partner schools against those of control schools with similar enrollment and demographics, we can assess our impact based on students’ learning outcomes, and make any necessary adjustments in our approach.

These assessments, done one by one with individual students, are labor-intensive and traditionally recorded using pen and paper. In an effort to make the process more efficient and reduce the potential for errors, Room to Read piloted the use of hand-held tablet computers for data collection in this district in 2012. The first set of data—a baseline measure—will be used to assess progress over time as children complete 1st and 2nd grades in 2014 and 2015.

To collect the baseline data, Room to Read recruited 23 enumerators, who received training on the methodology of the study. They also participated in two days of on-site training at schools measuring students’ reading, writing, speaking and comprehension skills.

Salma is one of the enumerators who participated in the initial assessment. A former English teacher, she heard about Room to Read’s work from friends in the area whose siblings are participants in the Reading & Writing Instruction program. She jumped at the chance to participate.

“The tablet we use is very convenient and easy to handle,” says Salma, who visited two schools per day for one month in order to collect all the necessary baseline data. “When we were using paper for previous assessments, it took a long time to organize and we were always worried about making errors.”
“SRI LANKA’S DATA WILL NOT ONLY TELL US HOW CHILDREN ARE READING IN THE TAMIL AND SINHALA LANGUAGES AND HOW WE CAN ADJUST OUR PROGRAM TO IMPROVE RESULTS. THE COLLECTION PROCESS ITSELF IS ALSO SAVING COUNTLESS HOURS AND DECREASING THE POSSIBILITY FOR HUMAN ERROR."
After arriving at a particular school, Salma finds a quiet, shaded place in the school garden and greets her first test subject. The first ten minutes of their time together are spent chatting informally—building trust and confidence—and explaining to the child that they will be playing word games together. Sitting across from each other, Salma then shows the student various letter cards and gives the child three minutes to identify the proper sounds. The tablet counts down the time automatically so that she can focus on the student’s response. As the student answers each question, Salma enters the results in her tablet. Later, the results will be transmitted to a server wirelessly for storage and analysis. “Once the information is in the cloud, the whole thing is over,” she says. “It saves so much time!”

The use of tablet computers as an assessment tool will expand to include Sri Lanka’s Sinhala-language schools in 2014.

“This technology we are piloting in Sri Lanka could transform the way our global team conducts assessments in the future,” says Peter Cooper, senior officer for Room to Read’s global Research, Monitoring & Evaluation unit. “Sri Lanka’s data will not only tell us how children are reading in the Tamil and Sinhala languages and how we can adjust our program to improve results. The collection process itself is also saving countless hours and decreasing the possibility for human error. Our hope is that if Sri Lanka’s technology pilot is a success, we could standardize this as an assessment tool across all ten countries of operation.”
At Vangheua Complete Primary School, the library has been a hive of activity ever since it first opened in 2011. The weekly book checkout rate is 200 books—an incredible accomplishment for a school with only 204 students! But like all Room to Read school libraries, this one serves not only the school where it is located, but also the entire community, including two nearby primary schools that do not yet have collections of their own.

“With all three schools borrowing books, the villagers began to use the library resources as well,” says Ms. Sysouphan, one of the school librarians. “Even my neighbors who do not have kids asked if I could bring a book home for them to borrow.”

Together with Ms. Nammasa, another librarian, Ms. Sysouphan keeps careful records of each book checked out, but with the library’s resources in high demand, the two women had never stopped to investigate which books were most popular and why. Eager to support students’ reading habits in any way they can, they enthusiastically agreed to participate in Room to Read’s Book Checkout Analysis—a multi-country study of children’s preferences and habits—to get more information.

By scouring and analyzing checkout data from their records, the team at Vangheua Complete Primary School was able to identify trends by grade level, gender, language, book level and other factors to share with Room to Read’s Research, Monitoring & Evaluation team.

“The survey allowed me to look at our library from another angle,” says Ms. Sysouphan. “For example, we now know that two books, The Beautiful Flowers and Who Makes the Best Papaya Salad are the most popular and we can recommend them to more readers.”

“The analysis also helped us to identify the students who like to read most and the ones who need more encouragement,” adds Ms. Nammasa. “With this information, we can work together with the teachers to help the children work through any issues.”

Two dedicated librarians help Room to Read investigate children’s book preferences and see their school library from a new angle.